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"Reconciliation Over the Graves:" The Volksbund and Germany's Culture of Defeat in Post-War Europe

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“Reconciliation Over the Graves:” The Volksbund, and Germany’s Culture of Defeat in Post-War
Europe

A Dissertation Presented

by

Sean Hough

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Abstract

“Reconciliation Over the Graves:” The Volksbund, and Germany’s Culture of Defeat in Post-War Europe

May 2024

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This dissertation focuses on the commemorative influence of the West German-based organization called the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (People’s Commission for the Care of German War Graves). The Volksbund oversaw the preservation and commemoration of German war graves under West German democracy, East German authoritarianism (clandestinely through the Protestant church), and across the cemetery spaces of Cold War Europe. The Volksbund created a commemorative approach based on the memory of soldiers who fought and died for their respective nations as heroes, regardless of victory or defeat, and produced a positive discourse of mutual respect and honor. By this metric, unpleasant discussions of the Second World War’s atrocities only served to divide Europe into perpetrators and victims – for whom both honor and respect was impossible. This study argues that the Volksbund contributed to West Germany, and ultimately reunified Germany’s integration into Europe through its conservative commemorative culture.

Key Words and Concepts

Culture of Defeat: Competing moral frameworks of war, violence, and defeat that vie for legitimacy.

Vertrauenspfarrer: Trusted or discrete pastors who ran the Volksbund's secret project to preserve, protect, and commemorate German war graves in East Germany.

Volkstrauertag: German Memorial Day, originated after WWI, officially (re)established in 1952, celebrated every third Sunday of November.

Westbindung: West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's foreign policy of Westward integration 1949-1963.

Neue Ostpolitik: West German Chancellor Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr's policy of normalizing relations with Eastern Europe without.

Aktion Sühnezeichen (Action Atonement or ASZ): German Protestant activist organization dedicated to German atonement for Nazi crimes against Jews and Poles.

Sozialistische Einheitspartei or SED: State socialist party and dictatorial regime of East Germany.

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Introduction

Since its founding in 1919, the *Volksbund deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (German War Graves Commission) has played an outsized role in both German and European commemorative culture for over a century. After the First World War, the Volksbund was primarily a veteran's organization for recently demobilized German soldiers tasked with building, protecting, and caring for the graves of their 1.7 million fallen comrades. Its founder, first president, and veteran Siegfried Emmo Eulen, pushed for the creation of Germany's first secular Memorial Day, *Volkstrauertag*, which the Volksbund first celebrated nationwide in 1926 with the help of the Catholic and Protestant Churches. Eulen declared the Volksbund to be both secular, apolitical, and nationalist in character. the Volksbund had just under 200,000 members during the Weimar era, which included Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.¹ The Volksbund also vehemently opposed the Versailles treaty and parliamentary democracy. President Eulen hired the architect Robert Tischler to design Germany's cemeteries and war monuments. He developed the *Totenburg*, or fortress-like monuments to commemorate German war dead. The commemorative style gained popularity among German nationalists during the Weimar Republic and became the defining commemorative architecture of the Nazi regime. Tischler designed many other Nazi-era monuments including a shrine to martyrs of the Hitler youth. Hitler repeatedly praised the work of both Robert Tischler and the Volksbund president.²

Previous works on the Volksbund described its relationship to the Nazi party as *Selbstgleichschaltung*, or self-conforming. Even before the Nazis became a mass political party, Siegfried Eulen and honorary President of the Volksbund Protestant Pastor Fritz Siems

¹ Bernd Ulrich, Christian Fuhrmeister, Manfred Hettling, and Wolfgang Kruse, *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Entwicklungslinien und Probleme* (Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2019), 493.

² George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 214-5.

referred to Hitler's failed putsch of November 9, 1923, as "the German freedom movement." In 1931, when the Nazis democratically seized control of its first state government in Thuringia, Minister President Wilhelm Frick instituted *Volkstrauertag* as a state holiday in return for the Volksbund's early support. After Hitler became German Chancellor in January 1933, Siegfried Eulen emulated the Nazi party structure by changing his title of President to *Bundesführer*, and the regional branches from *Ländervereine* to *Gauvereine*. By this point, the Volksbund members who were Jewish, or members of opposition parties had left the organization to flee Germany or go into hiding.

The Volksbund benefitted greatly from the Nazi dictatorship. Its leaders, most importantly Siegfried Eulen, demonstrated themselves to be active supporters, and architect Robert Tischler's monuments reflected the *völkisch* ideals of the Nazis. Both Eulen and Tischler had frequent audiences with the highest-ranking Nazis of the regime, including, Rudolf Hess, Heinrich Himmler, and even Adolf Hitler on a few occasions. The Nazis and the Volksbund cooperated in creating the Nazi cult of the dead. They instituted a day of national Heroes remembrance, changing the name from *Volkstrauertag* to *Heldengedenktag*. Volksbund membership increased threefold between 1933 and 1937, reaching 400,000 individual members and 9000 corporative memberships with schools, regional churches, trade unions, and other Nazified organizations. The Volksbund led countless prominent commemorative ceremonies of the Nazis. On the anniversary of Hitler's failed putsch in 1935, Siegfried Eulen and his managing deputy Otto Margraf led dual wreath laying ceremonies in Munich and Berlin for the sixteen Nazis killed in 1923. In the aftermath of *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, the Volksbund received confiscated property from

persecuted Jewish families, including a large Villa in Berlin-Grunewald which became its new headquarters.³

During the Second World War, Volksbund leaders, landscapers, and members served German armed forces and the Nazis in various functions. Otto Margraf advised Wehrmacht commanders on registering war dead, and served on the Wehrmacht's ceasefire committee during France's surrender in June 1940 and took responsibility for German memorial sites in occupied France. Many other Volksbund members followed the Wehrmacht's advances, assisting in the reburial, registration, and design of German war cemeteries across Nazi occupied Europe. Siegfried Eulen played a critical propaganda role and published numerous pro-Nazi and pro-war articles in the Nazi party magazine the *Völkischer Beobachter* and the Volksbund periodical *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*. Even in the final months of the war, when German defeat was imminent, the middle-aged Siegfried Eulen volunteered for military service and was killed in January 1945.

German defeat, occupation, and division in 1945 became a critical moment for the Volksbund. As an organization deeply enmeshed with the Nazi regime, its future seemed unlikely given the victorious allies' stated commitment to denazification. Yet, the lack of experienced officials to handle the hundreds of thousands of scattered war dead across occupied Germany, the surviving Volksbund's leadership early compliance with denazification, and rising Cold War tensions allowed the Volksbund to return. Over a century, after its founding, the Volksbund still occupies a prominent position in German commemorative culture. It still leads *Volkstrauertag*, including a prominent ceremony in the German Bundestag, televised every year. The Volksbund cares for Germany's largest

³ See: Ulrich, Bernd, Christian Fuhrmeister, Manfred Hettling, and Wolfgang Kruse. *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Entwicklungslinien und Probleme*. Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2019), 184-201; Jakob Böttcher, Hettling, M., & Nolte, P. *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag und gesellschaftlicher Trägerschaft: eine Geschichte der Kriegsgräberfürsorge in Deutschland im 20. Jahrhundert* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 138-156.

military burial grounds across Europe. It also influenced European commemorative culture through its program “*Versöhnung über den Gräbern*,” or “Reconciliation over the Graves.” The story of the Volksbund’s transformation and influence since 1945 has implications for the histories of both post-war Germany and European integration in terms of how war dead has been instrumentalized and the long term consequences of apologetics.

This study contends that the Volksbund contributed to West Germany, and ultimately reunified Germany’s integration into Europe through its conservative commemorative culture. Despite the attempts of the Volksbund’s leadership to obscure the organization’s Nazi past, commemoration of the German nation remained a central tenant of the Volksbund’s activities up to the 21st century. One might expect that an overt nationalist approach would fail at international reconciliation, especially as European integration gradually became a supranational project. Yet, the Volksbund, mandated by the West German state to represent German commemorative interests abroad, framed reconciliation as between former foes – defeated Germany and victorious allies. The Volksbund even included states that had a minimal role in Germany’s military defeat, such as Belgium, Denmark, Greece, and the Netherlands. This approach had strong appeal to the national governments of Europe. It was easier to reconcile with a former foe, nation to nation, rather than a former perpetrator of heinous crimes. Shifting the moral framework from perpetrators and victims to victorious and defeated created a positive discourse around the notions of honor, a common Christian European culture, and unity against outside challenges, i.e. Communism. This approach, perhaps even more critically, allowed national governments of Europe to avoid uncomfortable discussions of collaboration in Nazi war crimes. This part of the story began in post-war Europe at the height of Cold War tensions, but later included Eastern Europe during détente and after the fall of Communist regimes by 1990.

This study consists of three overarching narratives. The first follows the Volksbund's attempts to ensure the continued care and remembrance of German war graves in both Eastern and Western Europe. Its policy of "Reconciliation Over the Graves" helped to rebuild and normalize cultural ties between Germany and the states it occupied and waged war and contributed to West, and later reunified Germany's integration into Europe. Although this history cut across Cold War divisions, the question of German war graves did not escape national and ideological interests of the era. In most cases, West Germany's claim to protect all German war graves, mandated to the Volksbund, became another bargaining chip negotiations with the states of Eastern and Western Europe. The Volksbund's commemorative platform "Reconciliation Over the Graves" had its usefulness in the realm of commemoration for the negotiating national governments, but they also wanted other political or economic promises from the West German government in return.

The second narrative thread details The Volksbund and the Protestant church's clandestine project to save and quietly commemorate German war graves under East German state socialism. This story occurred largely in the context of socialist anti-church and anti-fascist policies. While the Catholic and Protestant churches became spaces of conflict between religious dissidents and those wanting to reconcile Christianity with Socialism, the Volksbund's project continued to provide delayed solace for grieving families and connection to West German national commemoration for many East Germans. The East German state waged a war of attrition against the established churches, the Volksbund's main proxy, in erasing German war graves to make room for its own commemorative goals. While the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) transformed East Germany's public spaces with its commemoration of Red Army soldiers, anti-Fascist fighters, and German Communist heroes, the Volksbund influenced the private memory of many East Germans. The results of this largely unknown story became apparent after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. The Volksbund

capitalized on its long-time clandestine presence in East Germany and quickly mobilized many East Germans to join the Volksbund or commemorate German war graves during the euphoric months of German reunification.

The third narrative follows the Volksbund's influence on West German commemorative culture and its attempts to remain relevant in an increasingly pluralistic society. The Volksbund enjoyed a privileged proximity to the power of the West German government and influence of the established churches. A compromise between these three entities reestablished state commemoration with the reintroduction of *Volkstrauertag* in 1952, and the War Graves Law of the same year. The Volksbund's overt nationalism in its commemoration attracted more support from West Germans than attempts by the established churches and the West German state to present a more critical view of the recent past. Youth protest, increasing focus on Holocaust remembrance, and attempts to view Germany's past more critically by the late 1960s threatened the Volksbund's future. These socio-cultural upheavals at home threatened the Volksbund just as it made critical breakthroughs in reconciling with both Western and Eastern European nations, such as Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, and Yugoslavia. In 1970, a genuine reform movement emerged from within the Volksbund led by its new President Willi Thiele. Yet, by the election of Helmut Kohl in 1982, the effort failed to attract support outside of West Germany's most conservative elements – veterans, expellees, and the Christian right. By the euphoric moments of reunification and the end of the Cold War, a decidedly conservative leadership was at the helm of the Volksbund at its highest moment of influence since the Nazi era.

Approach and Historiography

This research emphasizes competing moral frameworks through the lens of German defeat after 1945. The inspiration for this research was an interest in the long-term cultural impacts of defeat within a national lens. The so-called “Lost Cause” of the Confederacy was

the subject of many cultural and political histories of the nineteenth and twentieth century United States. It was Fitzhugh Brundage's 2005 *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* that told this history alongside the cultural memory of the American Civil War's other legacy – Black emancipation. As reconstruction ended and white supremacy reaffirmed its political dominance in the United States, Lost Causers sought to suppress Black emancipatory memory in public spaces and in history as the moral stain of slavery and righteousness of emancipation threatened the white Southerner's narrative of "honor in defeat." David Blight's *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* presented the gradual turn of American collective memory away from the Civil War's emancipatory legacy and towards reconciliation with the White South from 1865 to 1913. White southerners removed monuments to emancipation, pushed Emancipation Day parades out of town centers across the United States, and Black veterans were no longer welcomed at anniversary reunions.

The gendered nature of commemoration and the pivotal role female voices played in mobilizing conservative forces around national commemoration around war dead is a reoccurring theme of this analysis of the Volksbund. A recent 2019 book *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* by Karen Cox illustrated the gendered origin of the Lost Cause and the rise of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the most prominent advocacy group for confederate memory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Women also played a critical role in mobilizing returning veterans after the First World War in Britain, France, and Germany.⁴

⁴ See: George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1990); Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Benjamin Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations: Republican war veterans and Weimar political culture*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The key concept of “Culture of Defeat” lies at the center of this study of Volksbund’s impact on German and European commemorative culture. Cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch coined the term in 2000 in his influential history of the same title. In this book *Kultur der Niederlage*, Schivelbusch compared national cultures in the wake of military defeat as reflected in literature and national politics in the American South after the Civil War, France after their 1871 defeat at Sedan, and Germany after the First World War. Schivelbusch defined cultures of defeat as attempts to soften the sting of defeat, provide the moral justification for society’s downfall and its post-catastrophe form. States aim to cleanse a people of past wrongs, assign blame to former leaders, commemorate, and memorialize heroes and victims, and promote an interpretation of the past conflict in which the victors won through illegitimate methods. In this case, defeat functions as a chance for rebirth and renewal for the nation. In his three examples, utilizing political essays and literary works as his source base, Schivelbusch presented culture of defeat as a monolithic and uncontested cultural movement within each national context.

In 2015, the historian Akiko Hashimoto built upon and challenged Schivelbusch’s work through her exploration of Japan after 1945. Hashimoto defined culture of defeat as “multiple memories of war and defeat with different moral frames that coexist and vie for legitimacy.”⁵ Hashimoto moved beyond the high politics and literature that form the base of Schivelbusch’s study and focused on “the textures of historical and moral understanding in the everyday life of the broader postwar culture” and surveyed the narratives that circulate in familial oral histories, popular media, and textbooks.⁶

Borrowing from both Hashimoto and Schivelbusch, my study will be the first to apply the culture of defeat framework to the Volksbund’s work in Divided Germany and Europe.

⁵ Akiko Hashimoto, *The Long Defeat: Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

⁶ Hashimoto, *The Long Defeat*, 4.

Through utilizing defeat as a thematic and temporal lens to analyze post-war German memory, this research follows the competing commemorative frameworks of in East and West Germany until reunification. In both German contexts, the memory of war dead was contested in the context of the Cold War and emerging cultural divisions over how to remember the fallen soldiers and civilians of the Second World. In West Germany, it was the Volksbund, representing both state and private interests, the church, and various veterans' organizations who had to first negotiate a common commemorative narrative for the nascent post-war state. Emerging emphasis on Holocaust remembrance and a more critical view of the recent past among West German citizens complicated and challenged this compromise. In East Germany, the SED-dominated state established its own commemorative narrative around the Red Army and anti-fascist fighters. The Volksbund sought to quietly subvert this effort. As German division seemed a permanent arrangement by the early 1970s, the question became whether the Volksbund's project adapted to life under East German socialism or continued to exist covertly in the long term. The nationalist and conservative elements of the Volksbund did not fold or convert in the face of these challenges. Helmut Kohl's election in 1982 and reunification provided the opportunity to reassert nationalist commemoration among these other competitors.

Previous historians have praised West German efforts at confronting its past compared to East Germany and other nations. Ian Buruma in his 1994 *Wages of Guilt* praised German willingness to confront the Nazi past and openness to international scrutiny in contrast with Japan's seeming reluctance to do the same. In 2001 Bill Niven demonstrated that Cold-War era ideological faults were present in both East and West German narratives prior to reunification but argued that reunified Germany has since moved past these to honor victims of the Nazi regime. In his monograph *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans 1945-1995*, Konrad Jarausch has also praised the generation of Germans in the 1960s who sought to

critically confront the German past, marking a significant turning point in post-war German history. Jeffrey Herf's *Divided Memory* depicted East German memory as wooden, unchanging, static, and monolithic, memory focused on Germans as victims of fascism in contrast with the liberal pluralist West German state. The works of these historians together presented a (West) German model of confronting difficult pasts while presenting East Germany as an aberration. The Volksbund was at the center of post-war remembrance in West Germany, but as this research will demonstrate, the process of commemorating the recent past was conflict ridden and by no means always progressive.

This research also builds upon recent scholarship on East German memory. The East German state attempted to erase German war graves to make room for its own commemorative goals. The Volkbund, through its Protestant supporters, subverted these efforts for forty years. Josie McLellan's 2004 *Antifascism and Memory in East Germany* challenged the notion that the East German state had total control of history and memory by offering the example of German veterans of the Spanish Civil War. Suspected of espousing liberal values despite the party credentials of these veterans, their history was controlled by the state only for a younger generation of the 1970s and 80s to venerate them as non-conformists. Christina Morina's 2004 essay "Instructed Silence, Constructed Memory: The SED and the Return of German Prisoners of War as 'War Criminals' from the Soviet Union to East Germany, 1950-1956" demonstrated how the East German state's contradictory stance towards returning POWs – labelling some fascists while welcoming others - undermined its own anti-fascist rhetoric about the Nazi past. Jon Olsen's 2015 *Tailoring Truth* recognized the East German state's active role in shifting its depictions of the recent past to fit its political needs throughout its forty years of existence, often contradicting previous state narratives but providing powerfully symbolic narratives in the public sphere. These works demonstrated that the East German state was far from having monolithic control

of history and public memory of the Nazi era, but had enough influence to offer an alternative, rather than aberrant, view of the Nazi past.

This study of the Volksbund's influence on German commemorative culture also contributes to a growing field of research that questions the supposed progress in Germany's attempts to come to terms with its past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). The findings of this research reveal the continuity and connection of right-wing commemorative activities of Wehrmacht veterans with the rise of the Neo-Nazi movement in the 1980s and 1990s. With the increased visibility of the German far-right, recent scholars have emphasized the continuities certain trends in German memory have with the National-Socialist era. Jörg Echternkamp's *Soldaten im Nachkrieg* demonstrated how the West German state and veteran organizations facilitated the reintegration of Wehrmacht veterans into West German society by ending denazification and providing returning veterans an economic function and material comfort within West Germany's booming economy. There was little evidence of a genuine conversion from authoritarian to liberal-democratic values among this large segment of West German society. Jan-Holger Kirsch's 2005 article "Liberation and/or Defeat?" questioned the degree to which post-1945 German memory has embraced one concept over the other, instead arguing that individual memories of the post-war generation tend to embody both – celebrating liberation as a way to distance oneself from individual responsibility for Nazi crimes and mourning the defeat and destruction of the German nation. Bill Niven's essay "The GDR and Memory of Dresden," argued that the SED instrumentalized urban destruction and the destruction of German cultural sites during the air war to underscore the German people as victims of western imperialism. This ingrained memory did not disappear with reunification but found a receptive niche among some publicists and politicians in the west, although it morphed into a form of memory politics with more nationalist and less socialist undertones. Stefan Berger's essay "On Taboos, Traumas, and Other Myths" argued that

memories and myths of German victimhood have been morphed to fit the political landscape of the late 1990s and early 2000s and that there seems to be somewhat of a victory of private memory over public confrontation with the National Socialist past.

In his 2010 book *Guilt, Suffering, and Memory* Gilad Margalit argued that right-wing, nationalist commemoration has been a continuous part of memory culture in both East and West Germany since the 1950s in literature and film. Margalit questioned the efficacy of efforts by historians, journalists, activists, and politicians in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s in West Germany to confront Germany's past crimes openly and affect popular memory. The many monographs and essays by German historians Jörg Arnold, Dietmar Süß, Patrice Poutrus, and many others also underscored the prevalence of German commemorations both East and West that emphasizes urban and cultural destruction and German victimhood due to the allied strategic bombing campaign.⁷ These practices resulted in equivocating, minimizing, or ignoring Nazi genocidal crimes, prior to and since reunification. Having destabilized the notion that reunification ruptured previous commemorative narratives; this literature has challenged the progressive view of other historians towards Germany's efforts in coming to terms with its Nazi past.

⁷ Arnold, Jörg, Dietmar Süß, and Malte Thiessen, *Luftkrieg Erinnerungen in Deutschland und Europa* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009); Jörg Arnold, *The Allied Air War and Urban Memory: The Legacy of Strategic Bombing in Germany*, Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Uta Hohn, *Die Zerstörung deutscher Städte im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Regionale Unterschiede in der Bilanz der Wohnungstotalschäden und Folgen des Luftkrieges unter bevölkerungsgeographischem Aspekt*, (Dortmund: Vertrieb für Bau und Planungsliteratur, 1991); Ulrich Lamparter, Silke Wiegand-Grefe, and Dorothee Wierling, *Zeitzeugen des Hamburger Feuersturms 1943 und ihre Familien: Forschungsprojekt zur Weitergabe von Kriegserfahrungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013); Gilad Margalit, "Der Luftangriff auf Dresden. Seine Bedeutung für die Erinnerungspolitik der DDR und für die Herauskristallisierung einer historischen Kriegserinnerung im Westen." in *Narrative der Shoah. Repräsentationen der Vergangenheit in Historiographie*, Kunst und Politik. Düwell, S., & Schmidt, M. eds. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002. 189-207; Patrice G. Poutrus, "Bomben auf Elbflorenz." *Die Zerstörung Dresdens als Thema in der antiamerikanischen Propaganda der DDR*, (2005): 143-158; Georg Seiderer, "Der Luftkrieg im öffentlichen Gedenken. Wandlungen der Erinnerungskultur in Nürnberg und Würzburg nach 1945," *Jahrbuch für fränkische Landesforschung* 67 (2007), 333-55; Malte Thießen, *Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis Hamburgs Gedenken an Luftkrieg und Kriegsende 1943 bis 2005* (München: Dölling und Galitz, 2007); Malte Thießen, "Gemeinsame Erinnerungen im geteilten Deutschland. Der Luftkrieg im kommunalen Gedächtnis der Bundesrepublik und der DDR," in: *Deutschland Archiv* 41 (2008), S. 226-232.

Recent works on the Volksbund have examined its interwar history and relationship with the Nazi and early West German states. Jakob Böttcher's 2018 monograph *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag und gesellschaftlicher Trägerschaft: eine Geschichte der Kriegsgräberfürsorge in Deutschland im 20. Jahrhundert* (Between State Mandate and Societal Sponsorship: A History of the Care for German War Graves in Germany in the Twentieth Century) presented a detailed history of the structural and commemorative development of the Volksbund in its one hundred years of existence. Böttcher emphasized the Volksbund's outsized impact on long-term German commemorative culture due to its position as a private organization with a state mandate. The bulk of his research was on the interwar and Nazi, and immediate post-war eras up to 1955. The rest of the post-war era up to reunification was an epilogue and excluded the Volksbund's project in East Germany.

Bernd Ulrich et al's 2019 *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Entwicklungslinien und Probleme* (The German War Graves Commission: Evolution and Problems) provided a general overview of the VDK's history with particular focus on the Interwar, Nazi, and immediate post war eras. Ulrich et al's book provided a brief overview of the Volksbund's thwarted attempts to gain access to German graves and memorial sites beyond in Eastern Europe but did not offer any substantive claims regarding the Volksbund's work outside Germany after 1945. Neither work focused on the Volksbund's post-1945 work and overlooked the significance of its work across post-war Europe.

This research will also contribute to the diplomatic history of West Germany. Documents overlooked by previous scholars and new research into recently declassified files in Germany's federal archives reveal a dynamic relationship between West German chancellors and the Volksbund. Before West Germany could represent itself abroad in 1955, West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer granted Volksbund a state mandate to make cultural connections with West Germany's Western neighbors. Prior to the normalization of

relations and contribute to his policy of *Westbindung* or integrating West Germany into the Western alliance. The other period of active coordination between the Volksbund and the West German chancellors started with Willi Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* and Willi Thiele's efforts to reform the Volksbund. Willi Thiele's discussions with Soviet ambassador Valentin Falin over the German War graves question in 1972 helped pass the treaty of Moscow through the West German parliament. This era of close cooperation weakened under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt but strengthened again under Helmut Kohl just as conservatives returned to lead the Volksbund. Access to German war graves in Eastern Europe acted as another avenue to pursue détente under the Brandt and Schmidt administrations. Kohl utilized the war graves question in his negotiations with Mikhail Gorbachev and Poland's first post-Communist government in 1989 to push for greater European integration. Jacob Eder's 2016 monograph *Holocaust Angst* also linked West German diplomacy with memory of the Second World War through the attempts of the Foreign Office and Kohl administration to steer the American public away from a negative view of the West German state in the light of increased public awareness of the Holocaust. This research demonstrates another side of this link between memory and diplomacy.

A final contribution of this research is placing the history and memory politics of post-war, divided Germany into a larger context of European memory studies and integration. The conclusions of this research are nowhere near as comprehensive as the massive studies in this body of literature but took inspiration from their findings. Tony Judt's expansive work *Postwar* from 2006 presented a comprehensive history of European economics, politics, and memory since 1945. Judt's major intervention was telling Europe's story with Eastern European countries, especially Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, in equal parts to France, Germany, and Italy, rather than placing Eastern Europe on an aberrant path into modernity. In his epilogue on European memory, Judt emphasized the centrality of Holocaust

memory, and the twin threats of Fascism and Stalinism to shaping European collective memory into the 21st century. Judt presented the end of the Cold War in 1990 as the end of Europe's civil war since 1914 with a forty-year interregnum after 1945.⁸ Arnd Bauernkämper's 2012 *Das Umstrittene Gedächtnis* challenged some of Judt's notions on European memory since 1945. Bauernkämper placed a vast body of scholarship memory studies from fourteen European countries into a transnational context to understand the collective and communicative development of historical memory within the process of European integration. One of his arguments was that negative memories of National Socialism and the Holocaust are not suitable for advancing the European unification process; the universalization of the Holocaust risks removing the murder of the Jews from its historical context relying too much on Europe's violent past. Rather, Bauernkämper argued that positive European identity formation should come through "dialogical memory," or how Europe's states have worked through their violent pasts since 1945 through dialogue.

Chapter Summary

The first chapter presents the period from 1945 to 1952 and emphasizes the Volksbund's reestablishment during the first years of occupation and the beginnings of its new post-war role in East and West Germany. The first section presents the circumstances of defeated and occupied Germany that allowed the Volksbund to return despite its compromising past. The second section covers the Soviet Military Administration's, and later the SED's, decision to ban the Volksbund, which led to its secret partnership with the Protestant church to preserve German war graves. The third section analyzes the Volksbund's attempt to reestablish *Volkstrauertag*, a holiday with strong connections to the Nazi era,

⁸ Tony Judt, "Epilogue: From the House of the Dead: An Essay on Modern European Memory," in *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (Penguin Press, 2005), 803-834.

which draws it into conflict with the established churches and new democratic government of West Germany.

The second chapter presents the story of the Volksbund at the height of the Cold War between 1953 and 1965. The Volksbund received a mandate from West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to preserve and care for German war graves abroad, but also to build cultural connections to West Germany's new allies, and former enemies, in the West. The Volksbund's first steps to implement its "Reconciliation Over the Graves" preceded West Germany's ability to represent itself abroad in 1955. Yet, the process of reconciliation and negotiating war graves agreements proved to be drawn out affairs lasting until the mid-1960s. In Eastern Europe, the Volksbund was more concerned with accessing German war graves than any meaningful attempt of reconciliation. This rendered war graves another means to wage the Cold War

In chapter three, the Volksbund projects in divided Germany progress within their diverging political contexts, yet the Volksbund attempted to connect West and East Germans through the commemoration of fallen German soldiers. In East Germany, the Volksbund's proxies in the Protestant church adapted to the SED's anti-church and anti-fascist campaigns and continued its work to preserve German war graves encourage private commemoration among East Germans. After the construction of the Berlin Wall, the SED changed tactics. It tolerated the Protestant church's quiet subversion of the SED's anti-fascist commemoration. By 1965, uncertainty over whether the Protestant church should work to reconcile with state socialism or continue its illegal work for the Volksbund divided the church against itself. Also, by 1965, the Volksbund had to concede to the growing commemorative emphasis on victims of National Socialism and Holocaust remembrance. The 1965 war graves law expanded protection to the graves of Nazi victims. The Volksbund also compromised with the West German government in commemorating "all victims together" at the yearly

Volkstrauertag ceremony in Bonn, but this formula essentially equated fallen Wehrmacht soldiers with victims of the Nazis.

Chapter four presents the Volksbund's first breakthroughs in negotiating for the care of German war graves in Eastern Europe between 1965 and 1972 – first on its own initiative and then with direct intervention from Chancellor Willi Brandt. Youth protest and social upheaval of the late 1960s shook the Volksbund to the point that its aging leadership from the founder generation stepped down. Its executive board elected a new president in 1970, Willi Thiele, who promised to bring the Volksbund's commemorative goals more in step with a changing West German society. The shakeup at the Volksbund encouraged Willi Brandt to seek Willi Thiele as an unofficial part of his *Neue Ostpolitik*. In East Germany, local SED officials began erasing German war graves under the pretense of making room for communal space. As German division seemed to be a permanent arrangement, the Volksbund's Protestant partners considered working closer with the SED and presenting their work within the lens of pacifism rather than nationalist commemoration to secure the projects long-term viability.

Chapter five focuses on the Volksbund's efforts to access German war graves in Eastern Europe between 1973 and 1982 in the context of Willy Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik*, and his successor Helmut Schmidt's controversial NATO double track decision. Rather than signed war grave agreements between governments and broad social reconciliation between Germans and the peoples of Eastern Europe, Brandt, Thiele, and later Schmidt pursued a reconciliation from above through appealing to the interests of Warsaw pact leaders, who claimed to speak for the interests of their peoples under authoritarian rule. This was particularly the case in Romania, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia. Czechoslovakia and Hungary pursued a different approach, while Poland joined East Germany in refusing any official discussion on the German war graves question.

Chapter six covers the diverging paths of the Volksbund's projects in East and West Germany between 1973 and 1982. The stabilization of East German state socialism under Eric Honecker and continued social and cultural liberalization under the administrations of chancellors Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt dramatically altered the political and cultural contexts under which the Volksbund operated. In East Germany, the Basic treaty of 1972 eroded both church and public interest in the Volksbund's clandestine project through the Protestant Church of East Germany. A generational divide within the church between the older generation of church officials and the younger pastors looking to reconcile faith with state socialism divided the church and marginalized the Volksbund's project further. In West Germany, Willi Thiele's reforms continued to attract more criticism than support from West German society. This continued alienation, along with the failure of Thiele and the West German government to achieve a breakthrough on the war graves question in East Germany set the stage for the Volksbund's conservative base to take back the leadership by the start of Helmut Kohl's chancellorship in 1982.

In the final chapter, the three narrative threads come back together in the context of Chancellor Helmut Kohl's diplomatic breakthroughs with the Soviet Union and Poland, the fall of Communism, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. West Germany's resurgent conservatism prompted the Volksbund to rekindle its relationship with the far right. Reunification became a massive windfall for the Volksbund. It reversed the decline in its membership and its remaining, but aging Protestant pastors in East Germany quickly rallied public support for German war graves as East Germans sought to reconnect with a past, from which they had disconnected for forty years. The final breakthroughs with the Soviet Union and Poland came thanks to Helmut Kohl's negotiations with their respective heads of state, and the Volksbund gained access to war graves without having to make concessions or assurances to the peoples of Poland and the splintering Soviet Union.

The conclusion outlines the consequences of the Volksbund's commemorative approach in reunified Germany and post-Cold War Europe in the 1990s and early 2000s. After a series of public controversies, from revelations of Nazi pilgrimage sites under the Volksbund's care, to its apologetic stance during the Wehrmacht exhibit controversy, the Volksbund distanced itself from the far right. Yet, its policies and public actions had already provided the space for the far right to grow in influence.

Chapter 1: Continuities and Ruptures in the Care of German War Graves

1945-1952

With Germany's defeat, a new chapter in the history of the Volksbund began that was characterized by both continuities and new directions. While the primary mission of the Volksbund remained focused on caring for Germany's war graves, there was a great deal of change in how the fallen men were memorialized and who took up leadership roles following a period of transition. The experience of total German defeat had profoundly altered the surviving leadership of the Volksbund, who sought to win back moral assurance for Germans following the degradations of the Nazis. Yet, the Volksbund had to contend with the realities of a defeated and divided Germany. The victorious allies created four zones of occupation to administer the defeated German population - the Eastern portion controlled by the Red Army, the Western zones controlled by the British, French, and United States forces. The four powers were united in their pursuit of denazification, which put the Volksbund's post-war future into question. The Volksbund was deeply enmeshed with the Nazi regime. Its president and founder Siegfried Emmo Eulen was a devoted follower of Adolf Hitler, and frequent contributor to the Nazi party's magazine the *Völkischer Beobachter*.

Yet, the growing division between the Soviet Union and the West allies, along with the massive amount of unaccounted war dead across the four occupied zones presented the Volksbund with an opportunity. It had the chance to sever its Nazi past and argue it could perform the hard, unsavory, and dirty work of locating, identifying, and reburial scattered war dead better than the four allied powers altogether. The first section of this chapter will demonstrate the context and rationale of the Western allies for permitting the return of the Volksbund despite its pre-1945 support of Nazi ideology, curtailing their own efforts at denazification. With the Soviet military administration in the Eastern zone, there was no tolerance for any civilian organization with direct ties to the Nazi state. By May 1949, the

Volksbund anticipated that their approval to work in the soon to be established German Democratic Republic would never be granted. They sought a work around through the last remaining interzonal institution – the Christian Churches. The second section argues that the Volksbund’s alliance with the German protestant church allowed it to establish a clandestine presence in the Soviet Zone of Occupation and continue national, conservative commemoration in the shadow of growing East German state socialism. After the founding of the West German democracy in May 1949, the Volksbund set to work reestablishing its position within West German culture. Yet, the defeat of the Nazis had delegitimized much of the Volksbund’s previous commemorative practices. Some elements had to change. The third section contends that the Volksbund attempted to create a new national, commemorative culture for the West German state through the reintroduction of *Volkstrauertag*. The return of this holiday united Germans in national remembrance and excluded victim groups that threatened to undermine that– in particular Jews and more generally concentration camp victims. The attempt succeeded somewhat, but not without critical concessions to the Protestant and Catholic churches and the new democratic government in Bonn.

Defeat and the Return of the Volksbund

As fighting in Europe ceased on May 8, 1945, around 5.3 million Germans lay dead across the European continent, 500,000 of which were civilians, mostly a result of the allied aerial bombing of German cities. The countryside of what would become post-war Brandenburg, where the last three major battles of the European theater at Seelow heights, Halbe, and in Berlin took place, held the highest concentration of war dead in Germany. Approximately 200,000 war dead, 170,000 of which were German soldiers, were spread across the Soviet zone of occupation, with the epicenter a triangular shaped region extending

Eastwards from Berlin towards the North and Southern stretches of the Oder River.⁹ As the German Wehrmacht tried to form defensive lines to stop the Soviet juggernaut from reaching Berlin, civilians fleeing West choked the German lines and avenues of retreat.

In the case of Halbe, a forested region just Southwest of Berlin, an unknown number of civilian corpses -likely in the thousands- numbered alongside the approximately 60,000 fallen Wehrmacht and 80,000 Red army soldiers.¹⁰ Red army forces attacked in two great pincer movements on April 24, attempting to surround and capture German forces during the final assault on Berlin. This maneuver trapped both soldiers and civilians, the latter of whom were caught in the crossfire¹¹. The Soviets removed most of their war dead for reburial in mass graves while leaving the German dead in shallow graves or exposed to the elements on the forest floor. A similar drama played out at Seelow Heights April 16-19 when the Red Army assaulted the Wehrmacht's last line of defense along the Oder River. Here, an estimated 100,000 Wehrmacht and Red Army dead remained scattered across a much larger area. The battle of Berlin added tens of thousands more corpses before the fighting finally ceased on May 8. But the dead would have to wait longer than just the end of the war to receive a proper burial, even if they could be found.

The care for German war dead in the first few years of the war was far from ad hoc and primitive as it became by war's end. The experience of the First World War demonstrated the need for a uniform process by which to identify the dead, or the remains transferred, and a bureaucratic structure to register the graves, and to contact surviving family

⁹ Hettling J. Böttcher, & P. Nolte, *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag und gesellschaftlicher Trägerschaft: eine Geschichte der Kriegsgräberfürsorge in Deutschland im 20. Jahrhundert* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 2018), 177.

¹⁰ Lakowski, Richard und Karl Stich. *Der Kessel von Halbe 1945: Das letzte Drama*. Hamburg: 2017, 138. Casualty figures for the battle of Halbe-Teupitz vary greatly. Lakowski argues 60,000 Wehrmacht dead and 80,000 Red Army dead were present after the battle, which represent the higher figure and the one often cited in recent literature. On the lower end, Monica Black sites only 40,000 dead combined. What further complicates these figures is that SMAD used Halbe as a mass burial site for Wehrmacht POWs after May, 8 1945. Civilian death figures for the battle have never been accurately assessed.

¹¹ Lakowski, *Der Kessel*, 64.

members.¹² In addition, the Geneva convention of 1929 anchored the care of war graves as an internationally recognized duty of participating states during times of war. As the Wehrmacht occupied territories across Europe, there was time to provide proper burials for war dead in cemeteries or even have remains transported back to Germany in some cases. The *Wehrmachtauskunftsstelle für Kriegerverluste und Kriegsgefangene* (WASSt) was a military organization responsible for the registration of war dead for both German and enemy forces and prisoners of war in the occupied territories. The *Zentralnachweiseamt für Kriegerverluste und Kriegergräber* (ZAK) was its state counterpart as part of the Reich Ministry of the Interior responsible for registering war related soldier deaths and their graves. Both maintained large, centralized grave indexes. Both corresponded with local registry offices to issue a death certificate and to notify next of kin.¹³

The basic structure of the pre-1945 war dead registration and cataloging survived into the immediate post war years, albeit severely reduced in capability and manpower. For example, the *Standesamt* or registry office of Dessau, a mid-sized town in Saxony Anhalt, led by Henri Bornhauser ended up responsible for clarifying requests for information on missing non-Germans – mostly forced laborers – and German civilians across a large portion of the Soviet Zone of Occupation. He, or one of his assistants, traveled across the southern half of the Soviet zone to clarify cases from Cottbus near the new Polish border, to Eisenach close to the American zone, and Magdeburg to the north. This area included numerous small and larger towns, and two major cities, Leipzig, and Dresden. Bornhauser often supplemented his reports with discoveries of unknown mass graves and, having attempted identification of a few surface-level remains, a few discovered identities that the registries could then catalogue.

¹² Böttcher, *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag*, 160.

¹³ The source base for this portion of research consisted large files compiled by the German Tracing Service (*Deutsche Suchdienst*) that together demonstrated this structure broadly: WASSt, BArch DO 105/11; Forwarded requests from the German Tracing Service, BArch DO 105/82/1; SMAD file on the German Tracing Service, BArch DO 105/85; ZAK and its War Index, BArch DO 105/89.

It was grueling work and, unlike in the Western zones who employed anyone who could do the work and were not high-ranking Nazis, there were few permitted to do this work in the Soviet zone.¹⁴ The Soviet Military Administration either did not value the work or were hard-pressed to find officials with sufficient anti-Fascist credentials. Why the registry office of Dessau ended up responsible for such a large region remains unclear. It was possibly because many of the larger towns and cities were completely destroyed, without capable facilities and administrators, and there were too few local officials without a compromising past.¹⁵

This work included exhuming remains of improperly buried or abandoned graves, attempting to find identifying markers (teeth prints, tattoos, dog tags, identification papers, personal affects), interring remains in the closest local or church cemetery either individually or in a mass grave, providing a basic headstone or marker with names (if known) and whether the remains belonged to Wehrmacht soldiers, allied soldiers, German civilians, or foreign nationals, and recording the location and aforementioned information. Organizations such as the German Tracing Service (*Deutsche Suchdienst*), WAST, ZAK, and soon the Volksbund provided index cards to local administrators, usually the registry office, and local churches to

¹⁴ In May 1945, American forces in Bavaria released a Wehrmacht sergeant named Otto Vorsteher from a military prison serving a sentence for theft. The American military government was looking for a literate German without a prominent Nazi background to work as a *Landrat* (district administrator) in Bavaria. Vorsteher convinced American officials that he was an imprisoned former professor of German literature despite never even finishing Gymnasium. The US military did not verify the claim and gave Vorsteher the job. Vorsteher used the printers and rubber stamps of the *Landrat* office to create multiple forged documents in his name including a law degree, a doctor's diploma for German literature, and a certificate attesting that he had received the Iron Cross at the rank of Colonel, among many others. Between 1947 and 1952, he moved from place to place using his new identities as a confidence artist across post-war Europe. In September 1952, the Volksbund received reports from Libyan officials in Benghazi that Otto Vorsteher was arrested for a receipt scam, and, upon a search of his apartment, he had plundered fifty graves of Wehrmacht soldiers from Erwin Rommel's desert campaign. He had previously worked for the Volksbund as a cemetery planner, with forged identity papers, which gave him access to graves while the Volksbund began transferring scattered graves to the new central military cemetery in Tobruk. His false documents and post arrest testimony revealed the origins of his crime spree. Embarrassed by the revelations, the Volksbund suppressed the story and quietly returned the plundered items to their respective graves without notifying relatives of what had happened. "Brief an Staatssekretär Thedieck Bundesministerium für Gesamtdeutsche Fragen von Konstantin von Beguelin, Bezug: Ergebnisse der Untersuchung der Vorgänge in Libyen, 11.09.1952," BArch N 1174/149; Evidence of widespread abuse and fraudulent activity within the tracing services of the Western Zones are documented in the files of the German Tracing Service, "Verbotener Suchdienst," BArch DO 105/87.

¹⁵ "Suchdienst für Vermisste Deutsche," BArch, DO 105/50.

complete, providing information on any discovered remains. Ideally, these were to be copied and shared with as many graves, missing persons, and refugee indexes as possible. This increased the likelihood that identities could be matched, next of kin found, missing person's report clarified with an identified discovered gravesite, or the successful identification of remains.

All zones of occupation in Germany suffered from “a coffin crisis” or a severe lack of materials, expertise, and an available workforce to provide traditional proper burials of the hundreds of thousands of corpses laying uncovered across German cities, towns, and countryside.¹⁶ These bodies were not just dead German soldiers and civilians, but allied soldiers of all participating nationalities, forced laborers, concentration camp inmates, and victims of the death marches of many nationalities who met their brutal end through allied bombardment, last minute executions from SS or camps guards, exposure, starvation, or any number of infectious diseases. Due to the spread of the latter, worsened through the material insecurity of food, shelter, sanitation, and clothing, mass dying continued well after the

¹⁶ Monica Black. *Death in Berlin: From Weimar to Divided Germany* (Washington DC: German Historical Institute, 2010), 151; Several other English and German language sources in addition to Monica Black's *Death in Berlin* have analyzed the care for the dead in German urban centers due to the allied bombing campaigns between 1942 and 1945; Alon Confino, Paul Betts, and Dirk Schumann, eds. *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008); Jörg Arnold, Dietmar Süß, and Malte Thießen. *Luftkrieg Erinnerungen in Deutschland und Europa* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009); Jörg Arnold, *The Allied Air War and Urban Memory: The Legacy of Strategic Bombing in Germany* (Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare. Cambridge University Press, 2011); Gilad Margalit, “Der Luftangriff auf Dresden. Seine Bedeutung für die Erinnerungspolitik der DDR und für die Herauskrystallisierung einer historischen Kriegserinnerung im Westen.” in *Narrative der Shoah. Repräsentationen der Vergangenheit in Historiographie, Kunst und Politik* (Düwell, S., & Schmidt, M. eds. Paderborn: Schöningh), 2002. 189-207; Malte Thießen, *Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis Hamburgs Gedenken an Luftkrieg und Kriegsende 1943 bis 2005* (München: Dölling und Galitz, 2007); Malte Thießen, “Gemeinsame Erinnerungen im geteilten Deutschland. Der Luftkrieg im kommunalen Gedächtnis der Bundesrepublik und der DDR,” in: *Deutschland Archiv* 41 (2008), S. 226-232. However, there is not yet a larger, systematic study of death and the care of the dead in the German countryside 1944-45. Richard Bessel's *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* provides a glimpse into the chaos and horror of the German countryside, but the focus remains mostly on demobilization, restoring order for the living, and the creation of the first military administrations. Many more deaths occurred in the final months of the war in rural areas due to the death marches, horrid conditions in concentration camps, last minute massacres of forced laborers and camp prisoners by Nazi guards, combat deaths by the tens of thousands during the Red Army's final push to Berlin, disease, starvation, and retribution killings. Filip Slaveski's *The Soviet Occupation of Germany: Hunger, Mass Violence, and the Struggle for Peace, 1945-1947* from 2013 comes the closest to filling this oversight.

fighting stopped.¹⁷ Unburied corpses threatened to worsen the already precarious situation as the fighting ended. Foregoing coffins or even adequate grave markers, ad hoc grave details of locals, soldiers, or nearby clergy prioritized public health with the hope that a proper burial and identification could be possible later.

The necessity of having to bury the anonymous dead in mass graves without traditional Christian rights or ceremony compounded the trauma of mass death and defeat. For many Germans, this post-war reality was reminiscent of what the Nazis had done to their victims. Allied occupied administrators issued some of their first ordinances regarding the care and disposal of the dead, demonstrating a shift in power for the care of war dead that Germans previously controlled. Being ordered to bury or not to bury implied domination and even humiliation for the defeated Germans.¹⁸

There were many instances of Germans attempting to restore a sense of morality regarding the care of the dead during the early months of transitioning from war to peace. For example, the small town of Kahla in Thuringia was the location of a major Junkers aircraft factory that employed 12,000 foreign forced laborers. Allied bombing raids in the war's final months killed dozens when the factory was hit. Kahla's own registry reported that the city administration buried the dead in a series of mass graves in and around the property of its local Lutheran church.¹⁹ Interring remains on church grounds provided a semblance of reverence and offered an easy location to identify for later reburial efforts. The responsibility for surveying and identifying the scattered dead fell largely to local bureaucracies that were still intact. The registry office of Dessau, for example, responded to requests from all four allied administrations in the summer and fall of 1947 to survey and provide death certificates for the graves of foreign nationals in Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony, and Thuringia. In some cases,

¹⁷ Black, *Death in Berlin*, 147.

¹⁸ Black, *Death in Berlin*, 151.

¹⁹ "Suchdienst für Vermisste Deutsche," BArch, DO 105/50, slides 67-72.

there were requests to exhume remains for transport back to their country of origin but most times the remains stayed for the time being.²⁰ Even though the material conditions to provide a proper burial were often lacking, there existed a clear desire to recenter the burial of war dead under a Christian moral purview.

It was this goal, combined with a lack of expertise, that motivated the return of the Volksbund following its functional end in December 1944 after its headquarters in Berlin was destroyed during an allied bombing run. The few remaining leaders of the Volksbund saw the destruction of Germany as an opportunity to reset the organization's path into the post war period. Some of its previous members had fallen during the war. Its president Siegfried Eulen fell in Holland during the final months of fighting. It was not until 1946 when the Volksbund could officially resume its work in now occupied Germany. The work that laid before the Volksbund was immense – much greater than the post-First World War circumstances that created it twenty-five years prior.

The Volksbund emphasized the care for war dead and the *Seelsorge* or spiritual welfare of the living as critical components of a western *Kultur* during the interwar years, but post-1945 it gained new meaning. Cultural and spiritual wellbeing had broken down during the last year of the war. The Volksbund added the restoration of Germany's spiritual welfare to its duties, further signaling a shift from its narrower purview of its past work. The surviving Volksbund leadership considered this expansion of its responsibilities a vital step to rebuilding Germany and returning to an equal status among nations. During the interwar period, the Volksbund emphasized the overtly nationalistic side of its work, but post-1945 it added the restoration of Christian morality to its goals. As soon as the fighting ceased, the Volksbund's surviving leadership sought to carry out its work as soon as possible.

²⁰ BArch, DO 105/50, slides 23-50, Suchdienst für Vermisste Deutsche.

This return was dependent upon permission from the military administrations of occupying allies and their diverging interests concerning German reconstruction.

Just a few weeks after Germany's surrender, the British occupation authority already considered approving the Volksbund to continue working where they had already reorganized themselves, primarily in Northwest Germany.²¹ It was not surprising that the British authorities were most responsible for preparing the way for the Volksbund to return its activities. They had close ties to the organization before the war. Great Britain's own Imperial War Graves Commission had worked closely with the Volksbund during the interwar years to ensure the war dead from the First World War received proper burial and their graves perpetual maintenance.

The British still considered the 1935 war graves treaty between themselves, France, and Germany to be in effect, in which the Volksbund had a significant role in its negotiation. The British Military administration had already contemplated empowering the Volksbund in the Fall of 1945 due to the unlikelihood that the four powers could come to an agreement on the issue of war graves. During the interwar period, the care of German war graves at home and abroad, both responsibilities of the Volksbund, encompassed these aspects but with more nationalist and secular notions of service, honor, and sacrifice. A war grave was to honor military service for the nation as well as respect the dignity of the dead and the needs of grieving relatives. Under National Socialism, war graves became the center of the Nazi cult of the dead that considered battlefield death to be the greatest display of masculinity and service to the German nation. Following the collapse of the Third Reich and the creation of the Allied Control Council, the allies made public military tributes to the dead explicitly forbidden. As a result, the interplay of a more subdued and technocratic approach to

²¹ Böttcher, *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag*, 166-7.

memorialization of war dead and investigation of war deaths won more importance in the immediate post war years.²²

However, it was clear that as a prerequisite for allied approval to resume its work in occupied Germany, the Volksbund had to fulfill the guidelines of denazification. This proved surprisingly easy. The Volksbund needed to only remove any structures implemented under Nazis, which were few, and remove any former Nazis from leadership positions. The executive board and central committee of the Volksbund selected Wilhelm Ahlhorn, a long-time member of the Volksbund, to be its new president in Fall 1946, a year and half following his predecessor's death on the battlefield. The allies perceived Ahlhorn as an untainted selection because he had retired from the city council of Oldenburg in April 1933, never joined the NSDAP, and worked *ehrenamtlich* – a volunteer position with little influence policy wise - for the Volksbund outside of a leadership position.²³ In 1942, he briefly worked with Wehrmacht officials on technical matters concerning the care of war graves in France, Italy, and Soviet Union before returning to Oldenburg. His biography seemed cleared of Nazi ideology or collaboration, but being a member since 1919, he represented a continuity with the Volksbund's roots. Ahlhorn dedicated himself quickly to reforming the Volksbund's organizational structure, although this proceeded as more of a restoration.

Ahlhorn dismantled the hierarchical structure of *Gauverbände* (district-level branches), which emulated the Nazi party's own organizational structure, and replaced it with the more federal *Ländervereine* (state-level branches), which was the Volksbund's original structure before 1933. This restoration enabled the individual branches to act more independently and streamlined rather than having every decision approved by its national

²² Böttcher, *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag*, 166.

²³ Bernd Ulrich, Christian Fuhrmeister, Manfred Hettling, and Wolfgang Kruse. *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Entwicklungslinien und Probleme*, (Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2019), 298.

executive board. Not long after Ahlhorn's election, many other members of the executive board stepped down to avoid a lengthy denazification process.

Yet, some of those who filled these high-ranking positions or retained their positions in the Volksbund had also worked with the Nazi regime. Otto Margraf was one such example. During the Second World War, he worked as managing director of the Volksbund and occupied a military position. The German High Command (OKW) hired Margraf as an expert on the construction and care of war graves in the field and in the department of casualty reporting. He also played a role in the negotiations of June 1940 for France's surrender to address the question of caring for graves and memorials of the First World War during the occupation. In this position, Margraf not only tried to represent the interests of the Volksbund, but also its principles of war remembrance while constructing Wehrmacht cemeteries in Western Europe.²⁴ Margraf cleared the bar for denazification and retained his position within the Volksbund, however, some church and state officials from France remembered Margraf from the occupation years and held reservations about having to work with him later in the 1950s.

Some of the Volksbund leadership were adept at concealing their activities during the Nazi regime. The biography of Dr. Fritz Debus best reflects the ability of some Volksbund leaders to obscure their connections to the Nazis in the early post war era and remain in influential positions. Debus was a Wehrmacht grave officer before 1945 and was a recurrent contributor for the Volksbund's periodical *Stimme und Weg* but did not hold an official leadership position during the war. He played a critical role in rebuilding the Volksbund from 1947 until 1964 as a member of the executive board and leader of the organization's press and advertising wing. Debus was the creator of the mottos "*Versöhnung über den Gräbern*" (Reconciliation over the graves) and "*Die Toten verpflichten die Lebenden*" (The dead

²⁴ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 300.

compel the living) which reflect the guiding principles of the Volksbund up to the present. However, Fritz Debus was an early member of the Nazi party, joining in September 1932 and joined the SS in 1933. He also authored several Antisemitic texts between 1934 and 1942.²⁵ These revelations came only after his death in 1981.

The acting leader of the Volksbund's executive board and high consistory of the German Protestant church (OKR) Manfred Zimmerman was less successful in hiding his past. Zimmerman had vocally supported the Nazis in his own church publications. He attempted to dispel any questions regarding his relationship to the Nazis by reaching out to the Jewish community in October 1945. Zimmermann requested the surviving Jewish community of Berlin to name someone for the Volksbund's executive board. The surviving community leaders responded with great skepticism and first inquired where the Volksbund stood on care of SS graves.²⁶ Zimmerman defended his war time actions as an attempt to ensure that the Volksbund was not liquidated by or integrated into the Nazi Party through cooperation. The new executive board forced Zimmerman to step down in late 1946, along with pastor Fritz Siem's, its former honorary president during the interwar era. Through the departure of the Volksbund's high ranking Nazi collaborators, the Volksbund succeeded in meeting the minimal requirements for denazification and could officially resume its activities. However, the departure of these individuals from leadership positions did not end their association with the Volksbund. Manfred Zimmerman, for example, remained an important advisor and consultant within the German Protestant Church for the Volksbund.

Another condition of the Western allies was moving the Volksbund's headquarters out of Berlin. As tensions increased between the Soviets and the Western allies, communication between the Eastern and Western zones became more difficult. The Volksbund obligingly

²⁵ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 303.

²⁶ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 295.

moved their new headquarters to Oldenburg in 1946, Wilhelm Ahlhorn's hometown.²⁷ The relocation of the headquarters proved more beneficial as it became clear by 1948 that the Soviets would never approve the Volksbund to work in their zone of occupation.

The Allies forbade the use of the Iron Cross and other symbolic expressions of nationalist or military glory on gravestones and memorials. From their perspective, care for the war graves was only to fulfill the humanitarian purposes outlined in the Geneva convention of 1929 and to document the fate of the millions who died in the conflict. Even though civilians made up a substantial portion of the war dead in Germany, and the majority of victims during the Second World War, Wehrmacht soldiers remained the Volksbund's focus. Notifying next of kin was one of the first major tasks of the Volksbund. Due to the great upheavals and massive loss of civilian life during the war, addresses were seldom up to date and sometimes all listed relatives were also found to be dead or missing.²⁸ The Volksbund could clarify these questions through their close relationship with local, regional administrations at the communal and state level. Some communities, from urban centers like Hamburg to small villages of the Rhineland still perceived the Volksbund as an organization associated with National Socialism and refused cooperation in the early post-war years. A perception that followed Volksbund members well into the post war decades. Intellectuals, church leaders, and activists held misgivings about whether the Volksbund would attempt to renew militarist thinking and hyperbolic nationalism in the population, especially the youth, to whom the Volksbund had shifted their recruitment campaigns.²⁹

Despite the desire to rid Germany of National Socialism and militarism, the British Military Administration supported an organization that supported and worked for the Nazi regime. The British were partially willing to overlook the Volksbund's organizational

²⁷ Böttcher, *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag*, 169.

²⁸ Böttcher, *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag*, 172.

²⁹ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 298.

entanglements with the Nazis for expedience. Yet, it was mostly a pragmatic decision for the British. The Volksbund could support itself financially as a private organization and was formally independent from any state or party. The British wanted to keep influence from the future German state on the care of war graves as limited as possible, which gave the Volksbund favor over other official, state or government affiliated organizations such as the ZAK or WAsSt. Since the Volksbund was not officially incorporated into the Nazi state and remained independent, it fulfilled the denazification requirements on paper. Further denazification attempts against Volksbund personnel ceased after October 1946.³⁰

The Volksbund espoused the principles of the Geneva Convention concerning the care of war graves, which further endeared them to the Western allies.³¹ The Americans recognized the Volksbund in 1948 and the French followed in 1949. By the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany or West Germany on May 23, 1949, the Volksbund was already reinstated in all Western zones. In the aftermath of the First World War, its founders created the Volksbund to handle specifically war dead outside Germany's borders. Yet, without greater international recognition and an official end of hostilities, this larger objective had to wait longer. In the meantime, with the creation of two new German successor states, questions were now shifting to how Germans were going to remember their dead in the context of defeat, division, guilt, a now defunct military tradition, and what that would look like.

Gaining Access to War Graves in the Soviet Zone and GDR

When the headquarters of the Volksbund left Berlin and moved to Oldenburg within the British zone of occupation in 1946, a new branch of the Volksbund known as *Berlin Außenstelle Ost* in West Berlin took its place. Without permission from the Soviet military

³⁰ Böttcher, *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag*, 174.

³¹ Böttcher, *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag*, 176.

administration the Volksbund could not officially resume its work in the Soviet Zone of Occupation (SBZ). Given this situation, the Berlin Bureau became an important node for the flow of written communication from remaining Volksbund contacts in the East. The burden of caring for tens of thousands of scattered graves across the Soviet Zone fell to the Catholic and Protestant Churches of Germany in cooperation with local administrations.

The Volksbund's collaboration with the Nazis kept it officially banned in the Soviet Zone of occupation and later East Germany. As Soviet officials and German communists began to align both state and society in East Germany to the reigning ideology of State Socialism, there were few institutions the Volksbund could turn to in order to maintain its presence. Prior to 1945, the Volksbund had had many branches, properties, and members in the Eastern states of Germany as in the Western. The established churches of Germany played a critical role in all zones of occupation as a partner to the Volksbund since the final months of the war, but none so much as in the Soviet zone. The Volksbund had close relations with the established churches during the interwar period but the post war arrangement, especially in the Soviet zone, necessitated their cooperation even further. Stalinist State Socialism was openly hostile to religious institutions, viewing them as another ideological tool of the Bourgeoisie – and fascists – to suppress and control the laboring classes. The new satellite, State Socialist regimes of Eastern Europe confiscated church properties, limited or outright removed church influence in public education, and made thousands of arrests in these early years. Churches continued to exist, but in a diminished social role under State Socialism. In East Germany, the Protestant and Catholic churches' relationship with the Soviet Military Administration and later the Socialist Unity Party or SED was precarious, but stable during the transition from zone of occupation to an East German socialist state – an advantage over the Volksbund's status.

The German Protestant Churches suffered from a crisis of legitimacy for having overwhelmingly supported the Nazis but maintained significant influence in all German zones. Many Germans living in East Germany certainly began leaving the Protestant Churches after 1949. Yet, the Protestant Churches still maintained a strong enough influence to motivate the SED to undermine church influence in East Germany for the 40 years of its existence. For example, from July 7 to 11 1954, the Leipzig Church convention had 60,000 permanent participants, albeit mostly from West Germany, but over 650,000 people took part in its final event and were predominantly East German visitors.³² This event demonstrated to the SED that the Protestant church still held considerable influence in the lives of many East Germans, and marked a high point of the Protestant church's influence in the East.³³ The German Protestant Churches undeniably declined under State Socialism, but never

³² Rudolf Mau, *Der Protestantismus im Osten Deutschlands (1945-1990)*. Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen IV/3 (Leipzig, 2005), 52.

³³ There is a portion of the historiography on the church history of the GDR that overstates the influence of the Protestant and Catholic churches by focusing exclusively on state persecution and internal, theological debates on whether Christian doctrine supported resistance against or acceptance of State Socialist authority. These historians, often trained theologians, give an impression of the established churches as a center of anti-Communist resistance without addressing church attendance or contextualizing the church's changing role within East German society. See: Friebel, Thomas. *Kirche und politische Verantwortung in der sowjetischen Zone und der DDR 1945 – 1969: Eine Untersuchung zum Öffentlichkeitsauftrag der evangelischen Kirchen in Deutschland*. Gütersloh. 1992; Goerner, Martin Georg. *Die Kirche als Problem der SED: Strukturen kommunistischer Herrschaftsausübung gegenüber der evangelischen Kirche 1945 bis 1958 (Studien des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat an der Freien Universität Berlin)*. Berlin. 1997; Tyndale, Wendy. *Protestants in Communist East Germany: In the Storm of the World*. Ashgate, 2010. In response, several historians provided interventions to this oversight by emphasizing the changing societal role of the established churches, the severe drop in confirmations and church attendance, and the success of the SED's anti-church campaigns. They also place these developments in context with greater secularization in Europe generally. Yet, these historians do not sell short the Catholic and Protestant role in rallying dissident activity, confronting Nazi crimes and collaboration, supporting pacifism and conscientious objectors to military service, and attending to Christian spiritual needs. They question the assumption that religion withers away with modernity. Therefore, the established churches did not decline into insignificance, but continued to compete with secular rivals, both East and West. This research intends to build upon this historiography. See: Ziemann, Benjamin. *Encounters with Modernity: The Catholic Church in West Germany, 1945-1975*. Studies in German History: Volume 17. Berghahn, 2014; Ruff, Mark Edward. *The Battle for the Catholic Past in Germany, 1945-1980*. Cambridge University Press, 2017; Schäfer, Bernd. *The East German State and the Catholic Church, 1945-1989*. English language edition. Studies in German History: V. 11. Berghahn Books, 2010; Mau, Rudolf. *Der Protestantismus im Osten Deutschlands (1945-1990)*. Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen IV/3, Leipzig, 2005; Hockenos, Matthew D. *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past*. Indiana University Press, 2004; Greschat, Martin. *Protestantismus im Kalten Krieg: Kirche, Politik und Gesellschaft im geteilten Deutschland; 1945 - 1963*. Paderborn, 2010; Grossbölting, Thomas. *Losing Heaven: Religion in Germany since 1945*. English-Language edition. Berghahn, 2017; Legerer, Anton. *Tatort: Versöhnung – Über die Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste in der BRD sowie in der DDR und Gedenkdienste in Österreich*. Leipzig, 2011.

diminished to complete insignificance. In the immediate post war years, the established churches, especially the Protestant Church experienced a steady increase in church attendance and membership until 1949 – and 1954 for the Catholics – versus lower rates of people leaving. It has steadily reversed ever since.³⁴

By early 1948, it was clear that the Soviet Military Administration was not going to approve the Volksbund to work in its zone of occupation. In a letter to Protestant High Consistory Manfred Zimmermann from February 1948, President Ahlhorn stated that he and Bishop Otto Dibelius agreed that since there was no organization available in the Soviet Zone to systematically gather or look after war graves, the church should act as the custodian for this task. Otto Dibelius gained a reputation during the interwar years as a staunch nationalist conservative, Antisemite, and anti-Communist. Dibelius' devoted anti-Communism made him a dependable partner to the Volksbund – his continued Antisemitism notwithstanding. Both Dibelius and Ahlhorn also agreed to include the Catholic church and reach out to Bishop Heinrich Wienken in Berlin. Bishop Wienken had opposed the Nazis before and during the war and intervened to protect both Jewish converts to Catholicism and Catholic dissidents. His actions made him a prominent Catholic leader in post war East Germany and less controversial than Dibelius. Ahlhorn added that Pastor Ernst Teichmann was to become the main consultant for the Volksbund for working in the Soviet Zone. Ahlhorn also expressed fear that since so many graves in the Soviet Zone alone have not yet been moved to cemeteries, there was a chance they were already lost.³⁵ As more time passed, the more anxious the Volksbund leadership grew that graves outside its purview would be lost to neglect or desecration.

³⁴ Thomas Grossbölting, *Losing Heaven: Religion in Germany since 1945*, English-Language edition (Berghahn, 2017), 22.

³⁵ Letter to OKR Zimmermann February 16, 1948, EZA 4/1129.

The Volksbund's project fit well with Otto Dibelius' lifelong national conservatism and garnered his active support. Dibelius bade all Protestant churches to extend their care of local graves to remaining war graves that had not yet been surveyed, relocated, or maintained. Noticeably, the dead of concentration camps, death marches, foreign forced laborers, and allied soldiers were not included in his request. The church nor the Volksbund did not neglect these graves outright, but the omission made clear that those considered German took precedence. Dibelius defined war graves as including German soldiers killed in the field and civilians who lost their lives in the context of allied bombardment and expulsion – clearly referring to the German experience and not those of foreign forced laborers and other victims of the Nazis. Dibelius emphasized the importance of this work by stating that this was “a responsibility that the whole German people carry; that the care of these graves is no cult of the dead, rather a service to the living and care for the soul of the German nation.”³⁶

In a meeting in April 1948 between High Consistory Manfred Zimmermann and a consultant of the Soviet Military Administration named Yermolyaev, the two discussed the concerns of the the German Protestant Churches regarding care for the war graves of the Soviet Zone. Yermolyaev confirmed the growing suspicions that no association dedicated to the preservation of war graves would be approved by Soviet Military Administration. However, Yermolyaev assured Zimmermann that “there would be no difficulties if this task were taken up by the [Protestant Churches] so long as civilian graves were included and any semblance of militarism in their work is avoided.”³⁷ Church officials of the Soviet Zone had to publicly distance themselves further from the Volksbund even though church cooperation and relationship had increased considerably since 1945. Volksbund President Wilhelm

³⁶ “Rundschreiben des Herrn Bischof Dr. Otto Dibelius an alle Konsistorien in Berlin und der Ostzone,” EZA 4/1129.

³⁷ “Vermerk 13.04.1948,” EZA 4/1129.

Ahlhorn considered this public distancing a small formality to pay in order to continue the Volksbund's work in the East.³⁸

The German Protestant Churches and the Volksbund outlined further details of their agreement during a synodal meeting for the German Protestant Churches in the Rhineland town of Bethel in January 1949. High Consistory Manfred Zimmermann, Otto Margraf, and President Ahlhorn met with representatives from the Hanoverian Lutheran Chancery to discuss this proposal. This high church office, while lacking any executive function for the EKD, often functioned as a representative of collective interests for German Protestants and the various regional Protestant denominations or as an arbitrator during internal disputes. The men agreed that work could only continue in the East if they severed any connections through personnel or associative structure of the Volksbund. Regional, civilian governments in the Soviet Zone starting with Brandenburg on April 4, 1949, began banning the Volksbund from their territories, which made an agreement between the Protestant Churches and Volksbund more urgent.³⁹ The Volksbund reiterated that it remained responsible for funding this new Berlin Bureau of the German Protestant Churches.⁴⁰

The new East German government initially had no unified policy concerning the care of war graves within its territory, nor did it ratify the four Geneva conventions on the care of war graves. The Soviet Union cared for its own dead scattered across the territory of East Germany, constructing, and maintaining major memorial sites and cemeteries such as the massive complex in Treptower park. Local authorities in Germany had customarily been responsible for providing the policies for the care of the dead in Germany when it did not directly involve church property. East Germany relied on this existing structure for the first few years of its existence, not creating its own uniform socialist policies concerning war

³⁸ Letter to OKR Zimmermann 17.12.1948, EZA 4/1129.

³⁹ Excerpt from "Der Tag" 05.04.1949, Volksbund Archiv, A. 10-21.

⁴⁰ "Vermerk OKR Zimmermann 15.01.1949," EZA 4/1129.

graves, care of the dead, cremation, and sepulchral affairs until 1957. This lack of uniform policy in the East provided communities with enough discretion to work with the Berlin Bureau through the regional Protestant Churches of East Germany. The SED dominated state had to tolerate the Berlin Bureau in these early years but exerted pressure on local state officials and obstruct its work when possible. Many of the German war dead from the last days of the war were the remains of SS or Wehrmacht war criminals after all, whose public commemoration the SED could not tolerate.

On May 20, 1949, the Volksbund and the German Protestant Churches entered into a contractual agreement to care for German war graves in the territory of the Soviet zone of occupation. The Volksbund agreed to transfer funds in 10,000 DM increments up to four times a year through a Protestant Church account under the name “*Süddeutsche Kirche*.” The Berlin Bureau then received these funds, which seemed to outside observers to originate from church accounts in the West and then converted into the East German Mark.⁴¹ The Project also relied on church donations from East German parishioners, but the amounts varied greatly year to year. In 1951, for example, East German churchgoers gave a yearly total of only 6940.50 DM.⁴² 1952 fared better for church collections to support the war grave efforts with a reported 16,151.50 DM in donations, a significant uptick demonstrating an interest among East German Protestants for the care of German war graves.⁴³ This increase coincided with more public awareness of German war graves as West Germany passed its new war graves law, reintroduced *Volkstrauertag* as a national holiday, and the Lutheran Church of Berlin Brandenburg held services at Halbe in 1952.

⁴¹ Letter from Hans Bastanier to Otto Margraf 18.08.1950, Volksbund Archiv, A. 10-21.

⁴² “Vertraulicher Bericht” 16.11.1951, EZA 4/1130.

⁴³ “Vertraulicher Bericht” 06.10.1952, EZA 4/1130.

The contract listed the three officials hired through the church to the Berlin Bureau – Elisabeth Wurl, Walter Reinhardt, and Ingeborg Hampe.⁴⁴ The Volksbund selected Hans Bastanier, an artist and former lieutenant reservist in the Wehrmacht as the first leader of the Berlin Bureau – his interest in protecting German war graves while having no prior connections to the Volksbund made him suitable for the position.⁴⁵

Bastanier, among others, also thought that the Volksbund should draft a similar agreement with the Catholic Church in the Soviet Zone. The suggestion had some support, but practicality kept it from becoming reality. High Consistory Manfred Zimmermann argued that “nine tenths of Germans in the Soviet Zone belonged to the Protestant Churches” and the Catholics had a diminished presence and influence in the region.⁴⁶ Prior to the SED’s anti-church campaigns of the mid to late 1950s, one could reasonably claim this even if church attendance in urban areas had been in decline since the First World War. Only the Eichsfeld region of Thuringia boasted a large community of Catholics, with which the Bureau was already in communication.

One of the last points to settle was the permanent location of the Berlin Bureau. The somewhat open border with the Soviet sector of Berlin allowed the Berlin Bureau’s employees to cross into East Germany on daily basis, making West Berlin ideal. The Berlin Bureau’s first location was in a grandiose Grunewald villa, which was the former headquarters of the Volksbund during the war years. The Volksbund leadership benefitted from the Nazi persecution of the Jews and purchased the million-dollar villa in 1939 from the Jewish Heller family for 140,000 Reichsmarks when they fled the country – the Nazis confiscated the payment from the Hellers upon their departure. The Trustee of the Allied Military Governments in Greater Berlin for Jewish and Polish assets identified and

⁴⁴ “Abkommen zwischen Kirchenkanzlei Berliner Stelle und dem Präsidium des VDKs 20.05.1949,” Volksbund Archiv, A. 10-21.

⁴⁵ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 367.

⁴⁶ “Aktentnotiz Besuch beim Herrn OKR Zimmermann 14.07.1949,” Volksbund Archiv, A. 10-21.

confiscated the property in the fall of 1949 to return to the surviving members of the Heller family. The Bureau relocated to the more modest office building on Hildegardstraße 4 in Berlin Wilmersdorf.⁴⁷

With the contract finalized, one of the first tasks of the Berlin Bureau was defining its working relationship with the local and regional churches. Hans Bastanier recommended pastors to keep as detailed records of the war graves in their regions and reminded them of their *Ehrenpflicht* (duty of honor) – a term with heavy nationalist associations – towards the bereaved, to bring knowledge and solace to their uncertainly and suffering.⁴⁸ He then requested that pastors begin gathering information on the thousands of scattered and unknown war graves in their dioceses. Bastanier emphasized that many families in both East and West Germany were still waiting to hear about the fate of missing loved ones five to six years after their disappearance. To this end, the Berlin Bureau sought out women active in the church to provide ministerial care to surviving families.

The Volksbund had a typical relationship with traditional gender roles in Germany. Its leadership since the organization's founding remained overwhelming male well into the 1990s, with the late Volksbund President Siegfried Eulen's wife as the only female on the executive board until the 1970s. The Volksbund, however, encouraged women to take up their traditional role as grievers and *Kulturträger* (literally "carriers of culture") to memorialize and care for the sites of German war dead. The conservative, male leadership of the Volksbund also perceived women as politically passive, which therefore helped present the Volksbund as apolitical. Statistics are scarce, but most regional branches included many women members and the Volksbund held several women's conferences, encouraging female participation in the care of war graves. Volksbund women also sought to mobilize Germans

⁴⁷ Ulrich, *Volksbund*, 305-6.

⁴⁸ Ulrich, *Volksbund*, 367.

to reunite in national commemoration. Women had performed much of the groundwork for the Volksbund in Germany since its founding, presenting another element of continuity of the Volksbund's work into the post-war period. Much like the Volksbund's conservative views on gender, the Berlin Bureau was to be a quiet, subtle, private, and devious "female" project in the East, compared to the open, public, and official "male" work in the West.⁴⁹

The Volksbund and the Lutheran church of Berlin soon hired four additional women to run the Berlin Bureau – Gertrud Heidborn as its leader and three other women identified by their last names as Wiesner, Feyerabend and Krause.⁵⁰ The Bureau remained primarily run by women until its end after reunification forty years later. Between 1951 and 1964, Gertrud Heidborn – later Gertrud Martens-Heidborn through remarriage – ran the Berlin bureau on Hildegrdstraße after replacing Hans Bastanier.⁵¹

She intensified its work in East Germany through building a network of *Vertrauenspfarrer* or trusted pastors who act as specialists on the care of war graves and the bereaved. Accessible information regarding the biographies of the pastors and staff of the Berlin Bureau is often scant. Gertrud Heidborn is one of the exceptions. Born in Lasilla, Estonia in 1899, she grew up in the Baltic German community around Reval (today Tallinn). Heidborn described her father as having "led the efforts of annexation to Germany in 1918," which caused her family to flee when the German army retreated.⁵² They settled in Hannover, where she attended a school for domestic sciences. By this point, she could already speak

⁴⁹ In this way, the Volksbund is comparable to many of the ladies' associations that formed after the American Civil War in the Southern States in or in Great Britain and France after the First World War, although these examples usually had female dominated leadership. Grief, the experience of defeat, and the commemoration of the dead often have the potential for political mobilization. For example, the ladies' associations of the early reconstruction era of the American South took their work much further than just creating military cemeteries for fallen confederate soldiers. They actively worked to suppress the Emancipation Day celebrations of formerly enslaved African Americans, reserving public spaces for Southern white memory – an early harbinger of pro-segregation policies – and quickly achieved broad public support. See: Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

⁵⁰ "Stellenplan der Kirchenkanzlei 1961," Volksbund Archiv, A. 10-21.

⁵¹ "Vertraulicher Bericht" 16.11.1951, EZA 4/1130.

⁵² *Lebenslauf* of Gertrud Heidborn, EZA, 4/1130.

English, French, German, and Russian. During the interwar years, she married Ludwig Heidborn, a wealthy landowner and patron of the Protestant Church in Silesia. Her husband was killed in April 1944, and once again she had to flee West with her family due to war and annexation in 1945. In her application, she emphasized the following points that she and her husband opposed Hitler, she was no “political refugee,” and that she maintained close contacts with many in the Soviet Zone, including pastors, doctors, family, and church contacts of her late husband.⁵³ The first two points assured that the Berlin Bureau’s work in the East could not be politically compromised by her past and present associations. The third was an added bonus.

Gertrud Heidborn played a significant role in creating the network of *Vertrauenspfarrer*. She personally reached out to each candidate on behalf of the Volksbund to gauge their interest and motivation to occupy this largely voluntary role. Each of the eight regional Protestant Churches of East Germany was to name at least one pastor to gather information, report on, and care for the war graves in their region and remain in constant contact with the Berlin bureau. All except the Saxon and Thuringian churches appointed at least one, if not multiple pastors to survey and care for the war graves in their regions. For the entirety of the Berlin bureau’s existence until reunification the number of *Vertrauenspfarrer* was always around a dozen. After 1953 the Catholic church appointed one priest to work with the Berlin bureau. The *Vertrauenspfarrer* observed the condition of the scattered war graves and at times intervened to save them from neglect or erasure. They also maintained contact with professional stone masons, sculptors, and community members to encourage them to help voluntarily, or with the promise of later compensation from the Volksbund. The *Vertrauenspfarrer* met annually within the Berlin Bureau along with representatives of the Volksbund to report on their activities. Each meeting produced a transcript which illuminated

⁵³ *Lebenslauf* of Gertrud Heidborn, EZA, 4/1130.

their work for the near forty years of activity. The *Vertrauenspfarrer* worked *ehrenamtlich* or on voluntary basis with the trappings of a position and title as is common in German associations, but could have the costs of travel, and any materials provided out of pocket reimbursed.

The biographies of most these *Vertrauenspfarrer* are unknown, but some meeting transcripts and communications from when they were hired revealed some common characteristics. Both the Volksbund and the regional churches of East Germany sought individuals who usually were older, if not retired, who were discreet in their personal views, had expressed interest or experience in caring for war graves, and often had a personal connection to the Second World War. The latter was significant because the Volksbund and the Protestant Churches believed that due to the expected difficulties from the SED regime, the *Vertrauenspfarrer* had to be devoted to their work. If they had personally fought in either World War or had lost friends, family, or children in the recent conflict, it was reasoned that they would be more dedicated. In this way, the emphasis on German suffering and frontline service quietly returned to German memory culture in East Germany.

State surveillance became an early concern for the Volksbund's clandestine project in the East. One of the most important functions of the Berlin Bureau was as a nexus of communication between the Volksbund branches, regional churches of West Germany, citizens in the West inquiring about graves and missing persons in the East, and vice versa. Early in 1949, the bureau issued guidelines concerning communication running through its West Berlin location, most of them addressing communication running from West to East. The implication of the guidelines was that its communications were already under surveillance. The bureau advised Volksbund officials and branches to avoid using normal letterheads as to make their origin less obvious. If the name "Volksbund" appeared in occasional letters, Soviet and SED officials may consider them just *Irrläufer* (stray letters).

The key to the bureau's strategy was giving all communication the aesthetic of official church business, which both Soviet and SED officials tolerated. This strategy included using official church carriers to transport the post across the inter German border in Berlin daily.

Some Volksbund members were not pleased that they could not use the organization's name in their communications heading into the GDR. They believed that the Volksbund would slip from the consciousness of Germans in the East. In 1949, Hans Bastanier had to remind the General Manager of the Volksbund Otto Margraf that if East German officials discovered that the Berlin Bureau was really "led and financed by the Volksbund, [the SED] would use this for its [anti-church] propaganda."⁵⁴ If the East was to succeed, Bastanier reasoned, it would be of greater importance that the church is perceived as independent of the Volksbund. If the West were to win, then it would be easy for the Volksbund to make its return to the East. Bastanier concluded, "the struggle against the church belongs to the platform of communists, and the care of graves now has the reputation of being patriotic and anti-Communist."⁵⁵ Since 1919, the Volksbund claimed to be non-political, but they could not exist outside the Cold War ideological struggle. The very act of protecting and quietly commemorating German war dead undermined the anti-Fascist memory work of the State Socialist regime.

The growing sense of self-importance among some members of the Volksbund in what they perceived as struggle of Western Christian values against the atheist East became an influential idea in the Volksbund leadership at this time. As a result, the Volksbund leadership in Nienburg disagreed with Bastanier's position.⁵⁶ In many of these early exchanges, the Volksbund leadership in West Germany often underestimated the precariousness of the work described by their associates in the East Germany. The Volksbund

⁵⁴ Letter to Otto Margraf from Hans Bastanier 08.18.1949, Volksbund Archiv, A. 10-21.

⁵⁵ Letter to Otto Margraf from Hans Bastanier 08.18.1949, Volksbund Archiv, A. 10-21.

⁵⁶ Letter to Hans Bastanier from Bundesgeschäftsstelle Margraf 03.08.1949, Volksbund Archiv, A. 10-21.

likely presumed that so long as the Volksbund was not physically present in East Germany, the church's work would be secure, and that German division was only a temporary arrangement. This risky assumption gambled on the Protestant Churches' already uncertain relationship with the SED.

The first major test of state cooperation and toleration played out during the construction of the military cemetery in Halbe, located just Southeast of Berlin. Lutheran Pastor Ernst Teichmann advocated for and organized the creation of a centralized cemetery in Halbe with Protestant Church assistance.⁵⁷ He tirelessly lobbied for support from state bureaucrats at the local, regional, and national level. Progress was slow as local inhabitants and administrators were hesitant to provide the labor force necessary for such a large and undesirable task. Teichmann found that a pervasive sense of horror and uncertainty about remembering the German dead also contributed to this hesitancy. Even four years after the battle, Teichmann described the forest floor as "still covered with skulls, feet, and other bones, even women's and children's skulls."⁵⁸ One East German mother called the work in Halbe "impious barbarism," preferring the war dead to be left alone.⁵⁹

Teichmann constantly petitioned the SED to keep the project going, emphasizing that it will take years, if not decades to complete – not a matter of weeks. For example, in 1950, the Brandenburg state government in Potsdam passed a resolution to cease work in Halbe. Only Teichmann's intense lobbying of state officials in Berlin reversed the resolution and saved the project. By October 1951, Teichmann had to write higher ranking members of the East German government again to intervene.⁶⁰ He continued that he would not have wanted

⁵⁷ Pastor Ernst Teichmann had served in the First World War as a soldier and as a Wehrmacht pastor in the Second World War. He lost his only son late in the Second World War and was never able to recover his remains. This personal loss motivated him already in April of 1945 to organize work details to care for scattered remains around Dessau. This project and his later work in Halbe were his opportunities to ensure other families would not be denied that last act of solace. See: Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 369.

⁵⁸ Letter to Ministerpräsident Steinhoff from Teichmann 09.08.1949, EZA 4/1129

⁵⁹ Letter to the Church Chancery of the EKD from Hans Bastanier 01.11.1951, EZA, 4/1130.

⁶⁰ Letter to Ministerpräsident Nuschke from Ernst Teichmann 06.10.1951, BArch DO 4/2173, pg. 2.

his own father and child buried in the “impious” way that state workers have been carrying out their work. Teichmann described them giving the bare minimum effort in searching for and recording identifying features or clues and “hacking their remains apart with spades and garden shovels, before carelessly tossing remains aside in potato sacks!”⁶¹ He also described the habit among state workers to provide only serial numbers and no names to identify the dead, “numbers provide no solace for grieving family members...this is a cemetery and not a concentration camp.”⁶² Teichmann drew similar parallels between the state’s callous attitude towards the war dead and the Nazis, often angering state officials in Berlin.

Teichmann found more success in fostering state interest in Halbe through a more concrete and political rhetoric. He was at least savvy enough to point out that there could be worse political consequences if the state ignored the dead at Halbe. Teichmann noted to a party official in Teltow that “a complete notification of all surviving next of kin of the death of their loved ones is important to avoid rumors of secret prisoners of war.”⁶³ This issue was of greater interest to the SED and was the primary reason why it continued to support Teichmann’s efforts, albeit begrudgingly. Hundreds of thousands of Wehrmacht soldiers were still listed as missing and by this point the POWs of the Western Allies were either released or accounted for. East German citizens suspected their loved ones to still be alive and in the custody of the Soviet Union. The SED’s close orbit to Moscow compelled them to dispel these rumors as quickly as possible.

The cemetery at Halbe was not just a concern of the state government in Brandenburg, “but of all Germans.”⁶⁴ Halbe had the potential to tie commemoration efforts with West Germany and, from the State Socialist view, the cult of “fascist, revanchist militarism.” Even though state officials and locals preferred to ignore the dead of Halbe, significant interest

⁶¹ Letter to Ministerpräsident Nuschke from Ernst Teichmann 06.10.1951, BArch DO 4/2173, pg. 1.

⁶² “Abschrift” 18.01.1951, EZA 4/1130.

⁶³ Letter to Landrat Löffler from Ernst Teichmann 02.10.1951, BArch DO 4/2173.

⁶⁴ Letter to Ministerpräsident Nuschke from Ernst Teichmann 06.10.1951, BArch DO 4/2173, pg. 1.

persisted among Germans of both East and West. Bishop Otto Dibelius held a prayer service in the central cemetery at Halbe on November 16, 1951, with a great number of Germans in attendance, apparently “thousands from all zones” according to some reports.⁶⁵ The turn out and interest in memorializing the site had impressed the bishop, who wanted to reunite the defeated Germans through ethnonational commemoration. He later contacted the minister president of Brandenburg to plead on Teichmann’s behalf for further state involvement.⁶⁶ These appeals helped to continue Teichmann’s project even if only for the short term. Reburials and attempts at identification of remains persisted in Halbe for the rest of East Germany’s existence.

Another incident in 1951 tested how far the Protestant church would openly challenge SED dictatorship on behalf of the Volksbund. In August of 1951, the *Amt zum Schutz des Volkseigentums* (office for the protection of the people’s property) processed and seized pre-war assets and properties of the Volksbund for liquidation with Hans Warnke, the State Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior presiding over the process. In the text of the Volksbund agreement of May 20, 1948, the German Protestant Churches assumed responsibility for any properties and accounts of the Volksbund remaining in East Germany. The Soviet Military Administration in addition had seized bank accounts of the Volksbund left in the Soviet Zone equal to 3,263,000 RM during its occupation. The Volksbund, as well as the German Protestant Churches requested that the accounts be returned, claiming the Soviet Military Administration confiscated the accounts without justification. Since 1945, Soviet officials and later on with the cooperation of SED functionaries, had been expropriating properties, machinery, and Germany’s heavy industry as reparations to the Soviet Union. After the founding of the East German state and the SED’s dictatorship,

⁶⁵ “Vertraulicher Bericht 16.04.1952,” EZA 4/1130.

⁶⁶ “Vertraulicher Bericht 16.04.1952,” EZA 4/1130.

expropriation expanded to private property, corporations, and in the case of the Volksbund, private organizations.

The SED was well aware of the Volksbund's collaboration with the Nazis. Interior secretary Hans Warnke explained that the statutes of the Volksbund as of January 12, 1933, demonstrated that the organization was in collusion with the Nazi party, paid homage to the *Führerprinzip*, and incorporated reactionary and fascist elements into their care of war graves. On this basis, argued Warnke, the Volksbund fell under the Allied Control Council's Law Nr. 2 from October 10, 1945, classifying it as a Nazi organization, which justified the confiscation of its assets. Furthermore, Warnke mentioned that Church officials had no legal basis to create a trust for its assets and properties.⁶⁷

In January 1952, the Berlin Bureau composed the counterargument on behalf of the Volksbund and directed it to deputy Minister President Otto Nuschke. The letter argued that the confiscation only occurred in one zone of occupation, was done in secret, and was therefore not officially condoned by the Allied Control Council and not a legitimate confiscation. In addition, the bureau argued that the Volksbund was no more a Nazi organization than the church was. The letter continued that the Volksbund's "goals and activity were decidedly non-political and in the interest of the German people and this did not change after 1933."⁶⁸ Like the church, it was fully complicit in its support, and therefore did not require structural and ideological coordination into the Nazi state (*Gleichschaltung*). Not about to let the church and Volksbund keep its properties through technicalities, the SED liquidated the Volksbund's assets and properties. In the end, this controversy only outed the German Protestant Churches as a partner willing to stick out its neck for the interests of the Volksbund. The SED needed little more reason to suspect the church of fascist sympathies.

⁶⁷ "Freigabe von Konten des Volksbunds Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge Berlin W8 Warnke," BArch, DO 1 (Ministerium des Innern) /8703.

⁶⁸ "Freigabe von Konten des Volksbunds Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge Berlin W8 Warnke," BArch, DO 1 (Ministerium des Innern) /8703.

Past historians have often described East German's memory politics through its efforts to tailor the past to its political needs, but the physical presence of German war dead complicated this process. The cemetery in Halbe existed as the main location where ideological discomfort with the past played out in East Germany.⁶⁹ But any site of remembrance for German war dead, East or West, had the potential to ignite conflicts over remembering the recent past. The SED hoped the common experience of total defeat and delegitimization of the German state for East Germans provided a blank slate to build a new Socialist republic. Yet, significant numbers of German families still had loved ones whose fates were still unknown, leaving an open emotional wound. This hindered some from looking forward to the bright Socialist future promised by the SED. The efforts of the Protestant churches in establishing and caring for these war sites, supported by the Volksbund, bolstered this subversion of the SED's memory work. The physical existence of war dead and their visibility through marked grave sites and memorials maintained a connection with the trauma of defeat. Many East Germans, many of whom were willing to give the SED's path from fascism a try, found this discomfiting, and more so as time increased from 1945. Yet more conservative forces, such as the Protestant Churches and Volksbund connected it with the pursuit of solace through meaning – that the sacrifice was not in vain, for the dead have a lesson to teach the living. Neither the ethnonationalist nor emotional aspects intertwined in the Volksbund's project in East Germany can be overlooked, or even clearly separated. By 1952, the struggle to provide meaning to German defeat had only just started in both East and West.

The Struggle for *Volkstrauertag*

In West Germany, the Volksbund's relationship with the established churches was also close but operated under much different circumstances than in the East. Both the

⁶⁹ Black, *Death in Berlin*, 196.

Protestant and the Catholic Churches played a critical role in influencing the creation of the *Kriegsgräbergesetz* (War Graves Law) of 1952. This law officially granted German war graves a protected status in perpetuity, guaranteed by the federal states. Such a law was a relatively new concept in German history. West German policymakers took inspiration from the United States and Great Britain. The United States established nationally protected war cemeteries during the American Civil War, Britain followed suit after the First World War, and Bonn looked to these laws as models. Since the 19th century, city and town governments managed cemeteries in their jurisdiction in place of the traditional churches, which often included removing remains from grave sites twenty to thirty years after burial (*Ruhefrist*). This practice intended make room for more graves in areas with limited green spaces.⁷⁰

However, the established churches of West Germany and the Volksbund were not always in harmony in all aspects of their partnership. The post war period offered an opportunity for the churches to return to a more theologically driven remembrance of the dead. This commemorative shift ran counter to the Volksbund's attempt to uphold the modes of national-secular remembrance prior to 1933. The struggle played out during the attempt to reintroduce *Volkstrauertag*. Although the Volksbund had used the term *Volkstrauertag* since 1919, the day of remembrance often celebrated the fifth Sunday of Easter in the Spring was also known as *Sonntag Reminiscere*, and under the Nazis as *Heldengedenktage* (Heroes Day of Remembrance). The Volksbund attempted to create a new national, commemorative culture for the West German state through the reintroduction of *Volkstrauertag*, which it claimed set German commemorative culture back to before 1933. The interwar Volksbund had

⁷⁰ The Napoleonic reforms of 1806 and 1812 removed the church monopoly on funerary and cemetery administration. Private and local administrators for cities and towns introduced the *Ruhefrist* as a pragmatic means to free up space for burial as Germany's population expanded. The churches had long blocked the implementation of such measures, citing the Christian rite of eternal rest for the dead. Most *Ruhefrist* are between 20-30 years, when most cemetery administrators notice graves are no longer visited. At this point, they can be renewed. If not, the bones traditionally placed in an ossuary, but more often buried deeper so new remains can be placed on top. Some families chose this latter option, so a grave becomes a multi-generational family plot.

encouraged Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish veterans of the First World War to take part in a more secular but nationalist *Volkstrauertag*. Yet, the post-war Volksbund sought to exclude Jewish and perceivably non-German from its Volkstrauertag commemorations. Both the established churches and the new government in Bonn challenged this attempt out of their own interests.

Some Protestant churches in Lower Saxony suggested merging *Sonntag Reminisce* with the church holiday *Totensonntag* as a solution.⁷¹ Bishop Wilhelm Stählin of Oldenburg argued that *Sonntag Reminisce* “misunderstands the meaning of the holiday,” and that “in view of the innumerable victims, which the *Heimat* had also wrought, the commemoration of the dead can no longer be remembered as it once was.”⁷² Bishop Stählin seemed to apply responsibility, or at least the perception of responsibility, for the crimes of the Nazis to the German *Heimat* in general, not just the Nazi variant of nationalism in particular. Bishop Stählin’s proposal also sought to prioritize the older ecclesiastical calendar over nationalist tradition. Commemorating the dead at the end of the church year in November instead of Spring signaled a reassertion of Christian remembrance.⁷³

Stählin’s proposal triggered a new round of discussions throughout the regional Protestant Churches about the possibility of breaking with the Volksbund and establishing their own holiday for the remembrance of the dead. In December 1946, Volksbund President Wilhelm Ahlhorn sent a circular to all member churches defending the original conception of

⁷¹ The holiday Totensonntag had been a part of the church calendar for many German Lutheran churches since 1816. The holiday has secular origins as the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm III introduced it as a public holiday on the Last Sunday before Advent to remember the deceased in the aftermath of the ‘War of Liberation’ against Napoleon. It popularly became known as Totensonntag or ‘Sunday of the Dead.’ The conference recognized the holiday’s Prussian origins may make it unacceptable for some due to regional customs but, would at least lead to further discussion regarding the future of Volkstrauertag: Letter to the chancery of the EKD Schwäbisch Gmünd from the Ev. Luth. Church council Aurich 26.02.1946, EZA 2/650.

⁷² Letter from Bischof Dr. Wilhelm Stählin in Oldenburg to the Chancery of the EKD Schwäbisch Gmünd 07.03.1946, EZA 2/650.

⁷³ Letter from Bischof Dr. Wilhelm Stählin in Oldenburg to the Chancery of the EKD Schwäbisch Gmünd 07.03.1946, EZA 2/650.

Volkstrauertag. Ahlhorn claimed that the Volksbund's conception of "*Volkstrauertag* has since rooted itself in the customs of the German people...The Volksbund is not responsible for the notions introduced over the last twelve years [under the Nazis]."⁷⁴

This claim does not quite line up with the archival record of the Volksbund. The Volksbund had been developing more outwardly nationalist content for *Volkstrauertag* prior to 1933, which included to some degree growing emphasis on the "sacrifice for the nation" as the basis for memorialization. The Nazi state did inject itself into *Volkstrauertag*, but the changes they introduced were largely aesthetic, from the holiday's name change to Nazi rally-styled commemoration ceremonies replacing the traditional memorial centered around Christian aesthetics. The Nazis were also the first to establish *Volkstrauertag*, which they renamed *Heldengedenktag*, as a state holiday. The Volksbund leadership and organization welcomed these National Socialist changes as part of an ongoing process of nation building around war graves.⁷⁵ Rather than admitting the ease with which the Volksbund adapted to Nazi rule, President Ahlhorn, and the post war Volksbund leadership, emphasized the era as an aberration with no connection to pre-1933 developments. Ahlhorn argued that *Volkstrauertag* "is anchored deep in the conscience of the German people and [must] return to its original purpose."⁷⁶

The Volksbund's commemoration of the dead under the Nazis was part of a longer process of nationalizing war dead. During the interwar period two developments came to characterize the Volksbund's efforts to nationalize the care of war graves in Europe. Generally, this reflected the nature of soldierly death and growth of nationalism during the First World War. Individuality became defined through national or ethnic identity. Cemeteries became increasingly uniform in national identity, and therefore a uniform

⁷⁴ Letter from Ahlhorn to the Chancery of the EKD 16.12.1946, EZA 2/650.

⁷⁵ Böttcher, *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag*, 139-40.

⁷⁶ Letter from Ahlhorn to the Chancery of the EKD 16.12.1946, EZA 2/650.

gravestone and architectural style. The Volksbund's chief architect during the interwar years Robert Tischler popularized the *Totenburg* memorial cemeteries. These were fortress like memorials and mass burial sites that symbolized camaraderie, the soldier experience, and sacrifice for the nation.⁷⁷

Uniformity also emphasized the mass death of industrial war and the sacrifice of tens of thousands, many nameless in death, for the nation. Anglo-American cemeteries with seemingly endless rows of white marble crosses emphasized the individual sacrifices of many, such as at the Meuse-Argonne American military cemetery. The French constructed both massive ossuaries for unidentified dead and individual graves, such as at Douaumont near Verdun.⁷⁸ This memorial practice often went in tandem with partly patriotic, partly chauvinistic, and partly xenophobic and racist rhetoric, which was symptomatic of Interwar Europe more generally.

In light of Nazi atrocities, there were some within Protestant and Catholic communities open to the notion of expanding remembrance to all victims of the war. In early 1947, regional Protestant churches of Germany began to take more definite positions in the debate. Twenty out of twenty-eight member churches, four of which were in the Soviet Zone of Occupation, supported of Bishop Stählin's proposal to merge a new, theologically grounded version of *Volkstrauertag* with *Totensonntag* at the end of the Church calendar. The churches also agreed that more emphasis had to be placed on German civilian dead and concentration camp victims.⁷⁹ Inter-church communication on this debate were vague about which victim groups belonged in this latter category. Placing such a broad category within a Christian context of commemoration removed the specific contexts behind why most victims

⁷⁷ George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, (Oxford University Press, 1990), 214.

⁷⁸ Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 73-4.

⁷⁹ "Rückmeldungen der Gliedkirchen 01-02.1947," EZA 2/650.

ended up in concentration camps – for example, being Jewish, Communist, a Social Democrat, Romani, Homosexual, broadly defined as “asocial,” or various other politically, socially, racially motivated reasons. Either way, the Protestant churches attempted to decenter the nationalist commemoration of fallen Wehrmacht soldiers for its own interests. However, none of the churches followed through with the proposed changes in 1947. When a few attempted, such as the Lutheran church of Nassau, its parishioners demanded the return of *Heldengedenktag*.⁸⁰

The Volksbund argued that it wanted to ensure a day was set for the collective commemoration of the fallen for the people of Germany without regard to religious affiliation.⁸¹ The Volksbund also considered the church days of remembrance for the dead to be inadequate because of the extraordinary circumstances in which millions of Germans lost their lives. These religious holidays remembered those lost under more normal circumstances, such as disease, age, or accidents. In other words, the Volksbund did not want to lose the specifics of historical trauma to religious timelessness.

Given the Volksbund’s response and the resistance of many Protestant parishioners to removing nationalist commemoration, some Protestant leaders were already willing to compromise. One bishop from Baden warned against preserving “unclear nationalist notions.”⁸² Another church official added that “ambiguous nationalist ideas are certainly not the right approach but connecting *Heimat* and *Vaterland* with the great sacrifice of the fallen would be reasonable.”⁸³ The effort of the Protestant Churches to introduce a reformed *Volkstrauertag* began to lose momentum.

⁸⁰ Letter from Lutheran church of Nassau, Landeskirchenamt Abt. III to the Chancery of the EKD 06.01.1947, EZA 2/650.

⁸¹ Letter from President Ahlhorn to the Chancery of the EKD 16.11.1948, EZA 2/650.

⁸² Letter from the Bishop of Baden to the chancery of the EKD 23.12.1948, EZA 2/650.

⁸³ Letter from the Ev. Luth church of Eutin provost to the Chancery of the EKD 24.01.1949, EZA 2/650.

The debate crossed into the political realm in 1950 when Volksbund President Wilhelm Ahlhorn gave a speech in the plenary hall of the new West German Bundestag in Bonn. Dr. Hermann Ehler, the High Consistory of the Lutheran Church in Oldenburg and CDU president of the Bundestag, claimed that the Ahlhorn's speech to the Bundestag led to considerable controversy among those in attendance.⁸⁴ He also claimed that President Theodor Heuss admitted to him in private that he also found elements of the speech "disturbing and regrettable."⁸⁵ From Ehler's perspective, the remembrance of the dead had to be done in a correct way as to reflect the current national situation and not to return to the abuse of remembrance of the dead practiced during the Third Reich.⁸⁶ High ranking officials of the West German government from President Theodor Heuss to members of chancellor Adenauer's ministerial cabinet now saw the necessity to settle the dispute and create a national day of commemoration for the nascent West German state without the militarist-nationalist trappings of the past.

As had already been the case with this debate, the West German government did not invite representatives of any Jewish organization or communities to partake in the discussion. But they were not the only ones excluded. On April 30, 1951, the Minister of the Interior Dr. Robert Lehr hosted a meeting in Koblenz with representatives of the Protestant and Catholic Churches, the Volksbund, and the *Bund der Verfolgten des Naziregimes* (BVN), an advocacy group for victims of the Nazis based in West Germany, to come to an agreement on an official day of remembrance. The ministry considered the East German based victim advocacy group *Verein der Verfolgten des Naziregimes* hostile to the Bonn republic and

⁸⁴ Hermann Ehlers had previously criticized the Volksbund for distributing two essays in church publications that pushed for their Sonntag Reminiscere and misrepresented the arguments of Bishop Stählin as "liturgical and pedantic," rather than his concerns about the Volksbund resurrecting Nazi commemorative practices: "Stenographischer Niederschrift der Verhandlungen der Synode der Ev. Luth. Kirche in Oldenburg" 14.03.1950, EZA 2/4416.

⁸⁵ "Stenographischer Niederschrift der Verhandlungen der Synode der Ev. Luth. Kirche in Oldenburg" 14.03.1950, EZA 2/4416.

⁸⁶ "Stellungnahme von Dr. H. Ehlers Präsident des Deutschen Bundestages 15.01.1952," EZA 2/4416.

explicitly forbade its attendance, excluding many former victims living in the East. The exclusion of these two prominent victim groups – Jews and Communists – signaled where the churches and state officials already agreed with the Volksbund. The exclusion also invoked the longstanding stereotype of the “Judeo-Bolshevik threat” – in this case a threat to German commemorative unity – as an influencing factor behind this meeting.

The topic of including any victim groups never came during the meeting, despite the presence of BVN representatives.⁸⁷ Instead, the focus remained on the conflict between the churches and the Volksbund. The representative of the Volksbund von Lützow stated that the Volksbund accepted separating *Volkstrauertag* from *Sonntag Reminiscere* but continued to describe the arguments of the EKD as just theological. The Interior Ministry recommended *Buß und Betttag*,⁸⁸ a German protestant holiday of atonement and repentance at the end of the church calendar on the second to last Wednesday before the first Sunday in Advent, as a compromise. Ministry officials reasoned that *Totensonntag* had too many traditions linking it to Prussia that would not be acceptable to all circles. Besides longstanding regional animosities towards the defunct Prussian state, particularly from Catholic regions, many, including the Western allies, considered Prussia’s overt militaristic and authoritarian tradition as a precursor to the Nazi state. Bonn could not risk drawing on these historical connections. The meeting concluded with all parties accepting *Buß und Betttag* as an alternative except the Volksbund, which still pushed for *Sonntag Reminiscere*.⁸⁹

The leadership of the Volksbund feared that merging *Volkstrauertag* with any church holiday would cause a confessional split over participation. Adding another holiday in November where there were already three dedicated to remembrance of the dead may also

⁸⁷ Protocol of the 30.04.1951 Bdl meeting in Koblenz, EZA 2/4416.

⁸⁸ The holiday has its roots in medieval, German speaking territories, but shifted largely to a protestant holiday after the reformation. The Prussian state made it an official holiday in 1893, and it became a national holiday in 1934. Since 1994, *Buß und Betttag* only remains an official holiday in Saxony.

⁸⁹ Protocol of the 30.04.1951 Bdl meeting in Koblenz, EZA 2/4416.

have a desensitizing effect. Many members of the Volksbund also believed in the symbolic importance of remembering war dead in the Spring. One letter from a female member of the Braunschweig branch wrote “It was for good reason that *Sonntag Reminiscere* was selected. It was not the time of darkness, of the dying away of all that has passed...Spring was chosen for the solemn celebration in remembrance of the fallen. The day calls to us: German nation!”⁹⁰ This seasonal symbolism reflected a common commemorative rhetoric after the First World War Germany. But seven years after the defeat of the Nazis, it rang too close to the faux-pagan rhetoric of the Nazi cult of the dead.

The chance for a unanimous agreement seemed unlikely after the meeting in Koblenz. However, unlike during the meeting, the question of including persecuted victims of the Nazis in *Volkstrauertag* finally came to the surface. Lutheran High Consistory Hansjürg Ranke, the Protestant Church’s representative in the West German government, by chance ran into the chairman of the Volksbund Eberhard Hagemann in Bonn, and described his conversation in a letter to High Consistory Osterloh:

I had the impression that he was not sufficiently informed from his colleagues in the Volksbund. I explained to him unequivocally that any return to *Sonntag Reminiscere* for the EKD is out of the question. Hagemann replied that the Volksbund is decidedly behind keeping the holiday on Sunday but not on *Totensonntag*. I replied that regardless which Sunday at the end of the church year the church, the *Länder*, and federal government agree on, the dead of the concentration camps must be included with the dead of *Heimat*. This last notion was shockingly new to Dr. Hagemann. He said he had never discussed this question with his colleagues and doubts such a perspective would bring unity. I replied that the Volksbund should not let financial matters lead to a larger conflict with the EKD. Hagemann countered, somewhat lamely that it has nothing to do with finances.⁹¹

This reported conversation is significant for three reasons. First, Hagemann’s responses indicated that the central leadership of the Volksbund never considered incorporating the commemoration of the victims of the Nazis. This statement contradicted the Volksbund’s

⁹⁰ Letter to the VDK 03.02.1952, Volksbund Archiv, A. 100-141.

⁹¹ Letter from OKR Ranke to OKR Osterloh 13.09.1951, EZA 4/4416.

publicly vague yet inclusive sounding rhetoric with slogans such as “Reconciliation over the Graves.” Second, both men generally considered concentration camp dead to be excluded from German war dead, despite how many Germans died in the concentration camps. To them, these were likely only German soldiers and civilians killed over the course of the war directly by the allies, and indirectly by the Nazis who started the war. Third, High Consistory Ranke presumed the Volksbund’s reluctance was based on financial matters. In particular, the fear that including victims of the Nazis would necessitate additional financial contributions on the part of the Volksbund.⁹² Hagemann clarified that this was not the case. If one accepts this depiction of Hagemann’s argument in Ranke’s letter, the Volksbund rejected the inclusion of victims of the Nazis on the principle of having a day dedicated to just its own definition of German war dead.

In early 1952, the fight seemed just as intractable as in the previous year. However, the Ministry of the Interior found a simple way to force the Volksbund’s hand. On January 30, Minister of the Interior Dr. Robert Lehr announced that the planned *Volkstrauertag* ceremony in the Bundestag on March 9, 1952, was cancelled. The plenary hall of the Bundestag was to hold the constitutional convention for the states of Baden, Württemberg-Baden, and Württemberg-Hohenzollern. Lehr suggested that the Volksbund move forward with accepting a date later in the year, such as in November.⁹³ The date and location of the convention was not likely chosen for this purpose alone – the construction of a new state government certainly took precedence over an unofficial holiday – but it did prove convenient. The Volksbund feared that going a year without celebrating the holiday would decrease the chances of *Volkstrauertag* becoming an official holiday and leave national days of remembrance of the dead to confessional holidays.

⁹² The Volksbund later used finances as an excuse to not contribute to the construction and preservation of victims’ cemeteries in the 1960s.

⁹³ Letter from Bdl minister Dr. Lehr to the Volksbund 30.01.1952, EZA 2/4417.

This move by the government caused a public uproar with several groups rallying behind the Volksbund. The *Verband der Kriegsbeschädigten*, which had been petitioning the Interior Ministry since July, promised the Volksbund leadership in Kassel its continued support for the Volksbund's efforts and to increase pressure on the government in Bonn.⁹⁴ One influential member of the Volksbund leadership in Kassel was Christel Eulen, the wife of the late Volksbund President Siegfried Eulen. In a letter exchange throughout February between Eulen and the president of the influential *Weltorganization Mütter aller Nationen* (W.O.M.A.N)⁹⁵, she emphasized the importance *Sonntag Reminiscere* had for grieving mothers and wives. Eulen wrote "above all this is a day for mothers, who in both world wars had to bear the heaviest of all sacrifices," and assured that the "VdK, many Veterans' associations, and many other organizations are behind us."⁹⁶ The president replied:

We are also trying to make it clear to more educated circles that the natural need to venerate something is in every person, which must be supported in these irreverent times. *Volkstrauertag* and *Muttertag* are perhaps the only ideas that all levels of society could agree on. We are convinced that the words of mothers often go further than those of men.⁹⁷

This organization supported *Sonntag Reminiscere*, despite using the term *Volkstrauertag* interchangeably, and wanted the role of women to be emphasized. Women held a traditional role in Western societies as the grievers, especially mothers and widows. In the modern era of mass mobilization, the emotional symbolism grieving mothers and widows could be a potent

⁹⁴ Letter from the Volksbund to the VdK 27.02.1952, Volksbund Archiv, A. 100-141; Letter from the VdK to the Volksbund 17.07.1951, Volksbund Archiv, A. 100-141.

⁹⁵ A transatlantic organization with participating clubs in the US, Great Britain, France, Sweden, Switzerland, and West Germany, the World Organization Mothers of All Nations was founded by famed American journalist Dorothy Thompson in 1946. In a speech she gave before the UN security council, Thompson emphasized the war time experience of mothers who lost husbands and children and pushed for their mobilization against further conflict: "Gentlemen, speak no more to mothers [...] about your peace and its 'enforcement'. Your peace seems almost worse to us than the war was. For beyond war we saw the rainbow of peace, but beyond your peace we see the rays of lightning that accompany the thunder of war." The West German branch of W.O.M.A.N was founded in 1948 and remained an active part of the West German women's movement until 2010. See: Archiv der deutschen Frauenbewegung, <https://addf-kassel.de/dossiers/dossiers-organisationen/woman#fn-content-2>, accessed 02/27/2024.

⁹⁶ Letter to the President of W.O.M.A.N from Christal Eulen 04.02.1952, Volksbund Archiv, A. 100-141.

⁹⁷ Letter from the President of W.O.M.A.N to Ms. Eulen 12.02.1952, Volksbund Archiv, A. 100-141.

political force.⁹⁸ The President of W.O.M.A.N claimed that the “words of mothers often go further than those of men.” The Volksbund in the post war period was able to tap into this political potential. It was no idle bluff that the Volksbund could mobilize support from significant portions of the German people for *Volkstrauertag*. Yet, the structures of the church and state were working against them.

In a last-ditch effort, Volksbund President Ahlhorn spoke with President Heuss in February 1952. Ahlhorn complained about the way the agreement was being settled and that there was to be four holidays in November dedicated to remembering the dead (All Souls Day, *Buß und Betttag*, *Totensonntag*, and now *Volkstrauertag*). President Heuss replied that he considered the matter already settled.⁹⁹ The Volksbund agreed to November 16, 1952, as the first *Volkstrauertag* and the second Sunday before Advent for every year after if it was made a national holiday across West Germany. The leadership agreed to officially cancel their plans for *Sonntag Reminiscere*. The twelve states of West Germany ratified the proposal, establishing *Volkstrauertag* as a national holiday on the second to last Sunday before advent with the Volksbund as the sole organizer of the main ceremony in the plenary hall of the Bundestag.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ A good comparison would be the United Daughters of the Confederacy and other ladies’ societies of the American South dedicated to the remembrance of Confederate dead. They formed a formidable political block in the Southern states even in the era before women could vote. They pushed to secure an “honorable” remembrance culture for their sons and husbands in the form of suppressing Emancipation Day parades, supporting Jim Crow era laws that forbade Southern Blacks from organizing in public, and replacing them with days honoring confederate soldiers. See: Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005; Mills, Cynthia J., and Pamela H. Simpson. *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory*. First edition. University of Tennessee Press, 2003; Whites, Leeann. “Stand by Your Man: The Ladies Memorial Associations and the Reconstruction of Southern White Manhood,” in *Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader*. Ed. Christie Anne Farmham. New York: New York University Press, 1997. 133-149. A similar pattern of political mobilizations among mothers and wives of dead soldiers can be seen in Germany following the First World War. See: Ziemann, B. *Contested commemorations: Republican war veterans and Weimar political culture* (Vol. 36). Cambridge University Press, 2012. For Britain and France after World War One; Grayzel, Susan R. *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War*. University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

⁹⁹ Letter to OKR Osterloh from Lutheran Chancery President Brunotte 20.02.1952, EZA 2/4417.

¹⁰⁰ “Rundschreiben an alle Innenministerien der Bundesländer,” EZA 2/4417.

President Heuss gave the keynote speech at the first official *Volkstrauertag* held in the plenary hall of the Bundestag. Heuss, unlike the conservative Interior ministry officials of the Adenauer administration, attempted to demonstrate a liberal approach to commemoration for the new German republic. He united the competing commemorative approaches in his speech – religious and secular, civilian and martial – striking a balance between the various interests behind the ceremony. Yet, he underscored one theme in particular, that of remembering the individual humans of the anonymous dead. Heuss read aloud a poem composed by Walt Whitman in the aftermath of the American Civil War:

As toilsome I wander'd Virginia's woods,
To the music of rustling leaves kick'd by my feet, (for 'twas autumn,) I mark'd at the foot of a tree the grave of a soldier;
Mortally wounded he and buried on the retreat, (easily all could understand,) The halt of a mid-day hour, when up! no time to lose–yet this sign left,
On a tablet scrawl'd and nail'd on the tree by the grave,
Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade.
Long, long I muse, then on my way go wandering,
Many a changeful season to follow, and many a scene of life,
Yet at times through changeful season and scene, abrupt, alone, or in the crowded street,
Comes before me the unknown soldier's grave, comes the inscription rude in Virginia's woods,
Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade.

In his and the new West German democracy's attempt to establish new culture of remembrance, President Heuss avoided the rhetoric of self-sacrifice for *Volk* and *Vaterland* and dismissed previous aesthetics of commemoration as a culture of “very questionable and embarrassing war monuments.”¹⁰¹ Instead, he focused on how grieving individual loss binds all peoples together. Walt Whitman, a northerner walking through Virginia, did not state for which side the fallen soldier had fought, but the simple grave marker in the woods moved him nonetheless.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Gedenkrede des Präsidenten Heuss VT 1952, “Volksbund Archiv, A.100-16, pg 2.

¹⁰² Gedenkrede des Präsidenten Heuss VT 1952, “Volksbund Archiv, A.100-16, pgs 2-3.

Heuss used more concrete language to relate his theme to Germany seven years after the collapse of Nazi Germany. In contrast to the Volksbund, church, and state actors that actively excluded many victim groups, Heuss emphasized their remembrance, and in particular Jewish victims.

[Total war] jeopardizes the moral standards by trying to create a kind of justification out of the excess of destruction, out of self-destruction. Such a consideration – perhaps unconsciously – leads to the deeper meaning that the concept of *Heldengedenktag*, always accompanied by fanfares and marching music, has changed into this broader understanding of national mourning. This does not lessen the dignity of a soldierly death. But other victims for us and others are a thousand times greater in number. The memorials grow, for the victims of the bombing raids, they appear outside concentration camps, and on Jewish cemeteries. Ach, the time to heroize is past; it is simply boundless suffering.¹⁰³

By emphasizing the degree to which the experience of total war ruptured commemorative traditions of the past and included victim groups besides soldiers, President Heuss and the Federal Republic created the basis for multi-vocal culture of commemoration at the national level. This was a more liberal, commemorative approach for the second attempt at German liberal democracy.

However, this image of a more inclusive commemorative approach clashed with the strong-arming and semi-undemocratic way the state and church acted against the Volksbund to establish *Volkstrauertag*. There was not yet a clear consensus even within the government in Bonn on what West German national commemoration would look like – let alone a distinct form and content for *Volkstrauertag*. The Liberal approach presented by President Heuss was far from the uncontested form for *Volkstrauertag* after 1952. Understandably, both the churches and government in Bonn could not tolerate a commemorative style in continuity with the Third Reich, especially in the legislative hall of the new Federal Republic. It is important to emphasize what this meant in the political context of denazification,

¹⁰³ Gedenkrede des Präsidenten Heuss VT 1952, “Volksbund Archiv, A.100-16, pg 3.

rearmament, and integration of West Germany into the West. One of the first legislative acts of the new Bundestag in Bonn ended denazification (*Straffreigesetz 1949*). Paragraph 131 soon followed, which provided a legal means by which former officials of the Nazi regime could re-enter state service so long as they were not classified as major offenders.

Domestically, the Adenauer government seemed more concerned with integrating former Nazis back into society in exchange for political support than addressing their crimes and providing justice for their victims.¹⁰⁴ Internationally, tensions with the Soviet block and anti-Communist unity among Western nations took precedence over continued denazification efforts.

Yet, West Germany needed an aesthetic of atonement to gain political traction for rearmament and integration into the US led, western block. The official ceremony for *Volkstrauertag* in Bonn, an act of state solemnity recognizing a wider group of victims, helped to achieve this end. For some elements, especially religious leaders seeking support for ecumenical commemoration, this was an authentic display of atonement, but for others, it served other political purposes. In the end, none of these factors fully prevented national conservative commemoration from carving out its own space within *Volkstrauertag*.

In the face of liberalization, some social and political circles doubled down on commemorating the Wehrmacht in West Germany broadly without clarifying what, if any, organizations of the armed forces, such as the SS, were criminal and excluded. The *Volksbund* demonstrated during the debate earlier in the year that a large portion of the population, even extending beyond veterans' associations, wanted to retain more traditional modes of commemoration. Some kept it alive within their new conception of *Volkstrauertag*. In July 1952, the *Volksbund* stated that “in times when German soldiers are only spoken of as

¹⁰⁴ This claim is at the center of Norbert Frei's research in his book *Vergangenheitspolitik*. See: Frei, Norbert. *Vergangenheitspolitik: Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit*. München: 1996.

‘criminals or fools’ in the public sphere, the Volksbund stands for the remembrance of those who in fulfilling a difficult duty gave their last.”¹⁰⁵ One Volksbund member from Erlangen wrote President Heuss directly concerning his speech on Volkstrauertag. The man explained, “one could well imagine that if there had been no victims of National Socialism, the enormous blood sacrifices might not have had to be made in vain, since the vast majority of all sacrifices were made neither for Hitler nor for his party, but only for the fatherland.”¹⁰⁶ This statement is crucial to understanding how many bereaved Germans attempted to create meaning by separating German nationalism from National Socialism, and, for the first twenty years after the war, their war dead from victims of the Nazis.

The regional Protestant churches reporting to the High Chancery in Hannover also depicted their congregations as resistant to the new *Volkstrauertag*, providing examples of parishioners interrupting and challenging pastors as they announced the coming change. Despite the efforts of the established churches and the federal government, past nationalist, and militaristic styles of commemoration, both subtle and overt, persisted in local communities well into the post war decades, even as the Volksbund shifted its own stance in later years.

Conclusion – Defeat in Divided Germany

In both East and West Germany, the experience of total defeat presented a choice to all Germans. Were they to cut all cultural ties with the Third Reich or salvage some aspects to soften their transition to a new society? East and West German leaders and their supporters attempted to renew and redeem the German nation on new paths, unburdened of the past. Segments of the population resisted these attempts to varying degrees. East Germany adopted an authoritarian approach, privileging the antifascist fighter as the center of its

¹⁰⁵ “Der Volkstrauertag als Gedenktag für die Toten beider Weltkriege,” Volksbund Archiv A.100-139, pg 1.

¹⁰⁶ Letter to President Professor Theodor Heuss, 17.11.1952, BArch B 122.637.

commemorative culture, excluding other complicating narratives at this time. While some embraced or tentatively accepted the status quo, many simply sought solace in quietly remembering the war dead. Compared to the West, East Germany had many more war dead within its borders. To this end, the Volksbund and the established churches worked tirelessly to ensure the physical presence of German war graves remained in East German communities. The SED regime tolerated this arrangement, but as Cold War tensions increased, there were little guarantees it could last.

In West Germany, the physical presence of the war dead was never in question, nor did the state attempt to restrict public commemoration to its own ideological needs. The struggle in the West was adjusting to commemorative plurality – and Germany’s troubled past with democracy gave no guarantee this attempt would succeed. The main ceremony on *Volkstrauertag* held in the legislative house, first broadcasted live over radio in 1952, presented the potential for an inclusive, and multi-vocal commemorative event – one that only some West Germans were ready for. With few exceptions outside of Bonn, German war dead remained the focus.¹⁰⁷ The experience of mass death, defeat, and occupation triggered a high degree of defensiveness regarding the memory of the war. So many had died or remained missing, the need to grieve was irreconcilable with the knowledge of crimes committed by the Wehrmacht during the war. For surviving kin, these soldiers had whole lives before the war and plans or goals for life afterwards. To have their memory reduced to a brutal and criminal lost cause was incomprehensible for some. Their deaths had to have meant something. Yet, this denial had little to do with ignorance of crimes committed, and more with what historian Jörg Echternkamp called “an attempt to win back moral assurance

¹⁰⁷ Robert Moeller’s central thesis in his book *War Stories* is that West Germans during the Adenauer years were far from being silent about the war. However, the emphasis remained firmly on German suffering at home, on the front, or in Soviet POW camps. See: Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

(ein Versuch, moralische Sicherheit zurückzugewinnen).”¹⁰⁸ Once material and physical security returned to Germany, Germans attempted to wrest moral assurance from defeat and ignominy – albeit in different trajectories between the East and West. The Volksbund and the established churches were in a unique position to influence these trajectories in both German states as the Cold War intensified during the 1950s and 60s.

¹⁰⁸ Jörg Echternkamp, *Soldaten im Nachkrieg: Historische Deutungskonflikte und westdeutsche Demokratisierung 1945-1955*: München, 2014, 448.

Chapter 2: The Success and Limits of “Reconciliation over the Graves” in Cold War Europe 1953-65

The early 1950s was an era of intensifying Cold War divisions between Eastern and Western Europe. Yet, it was also West Germany’s chance to reconcile with its new Western allies and neighbors. Westward integration into NATO, the European Economic Community, and West Germany’s pursuit of full sovereignty became features of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s foreign policy. Prior to 1955 and the normalization of relations between West Germany and its Western allies, West Germany could not represent itself abroad. Konrad Adenauer granted the Volksbund the equivalent of a state mandate to perform this role in the cultural and commemorative realm. As part of Adenauer’s *Westbindung*, or westward integration, the Volksbund initiated the long and difficult process of reconciliation in Western Europe. Despite the professed unity in anti-Communism, social market economics, and liberal democracy, the scars and memories of German atrocities ran deep in Western Europe. The Volksbund’s early attempts to protect German war graves and reconcile with former enemies in France, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Norway for example met hostility. Overtime, the benefits of West German integration outweighed bitter memories. In addition, the Volksbund developed a new commemorative program it called “Reconciliation over the Graves,” which proved useful to the commemorative goals of other Western European governments. The first section argues Adenauer’s mandate for the Volksbund empowered it to make these first steps towards commemorative European integration as a private organization. Although the Volksbund’s model for reconciliation was based in nationalist commemoration of German war graves, it appealed to other Western European states as a means to promote their own commemorative narratives and exclude histories of collaboration and complicity in the Holocaust and other war time atrocities.

Starting in the late 1950s, the Volksbund considered finding ways to extend its efforts to Eastern Europe. By 1956, West Germany had a tenuous, consular relationship with the Soviet Union, but no official relationship with the other Eastern European states. West Germany's Hallstein doctrine forbade diplomatic relations with any state besides the Soviet Union that recognized East German sovereignty. The Volksbund's *Referat Ost*, an office of so-called Eastern specialists with questionable Nazi pasts, attempted to access German war graves in Eastern Europe without pursuing any meaningful attempts at reconciliation. The major focus of these efforts was correlated with the interests of the expellee community in laying claim to the lost Eastern territories annexed by Poland and the Soviet Union. In this way, the struggle to access German war graves became another means to wage the Cold War.

***Westbindung* and “Reconciliation over the Graves” in Western Europe**

Since the founding of West Germany in May 1949, its first Chancellor Konrad Adenauer had set the reestablishment of West German sovereignty as his top foreign policy initiative. Yet, this had to occur in a way that tied West Germany to the Western allies – a policy known as *Westbindung*. By the end of 1949, Adenauer had pushed West Germany's entry into the Ruhr administration through the parliament in Bonn. The administration included Britain, France, the United States, and the Benelux countries and managed the production of coal and steel in Germany's Rhine region and Westphalia. It was a first step in West Germany regaining participation in not only its economic recovery, but the economic development of Western Europe. The following year, the French government presented West Germany with the Schuman plan, named for France's Foreign Minister Robert Schuman. The plan created a common market for steel and coal among the six founding countries – the Benelux countries, France, Italy, and West Germany. By 1951, the six countries established the European Coal and Steel Community. In 1952, The West German parliament ratified the treaty that transformed the ECSC into the European Economic Community, and set the first

steps towards European integration, and West Germany's full sovereignty. That same year, the general treaty between the three western powers and the government in Bonn granted West Germany full authority in its domestic and foreign affairs. However, full sovereignty remained elusive as German division and its unsettled eastern border with Poland persisted. In addition, the western allies reserved the right to intervene militarily in West Germany in the case of international or domestic crises.¹⁰⁹

In June 1951, Volksbund General Secretary Otto Margraf, and the leader of the Foreign Office's cultural department Trützschler von Falkenstein began to negotiate over the role of the Volksbund in caring for war graves abroad. One official, Legationsrat Hergt, himself a former soldier, was especially receptive to the Volksbund's work and advocated granting the Volksbund as much independence abroad as Bonn could reasonably give.¹¹⁰ At the same time, the Volksbund understood its work as a direct mandate from the federal government in Bonn. This distinction was important considering the Volksbund's desire for post-war legitimacy. The Volksbund was able to forge relationships that extended outside the government's purview but also viewed themselves as drawing legitimacy from the West German government. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer later forwarded a letter detailing this mandate in November 1954, which the Volksbund frequently cited.¹¹¹ The Chancellor ended his letter thanking the Volksbund for "its work achieved thus far" and requested it continue its work "in close cooperation with the federal government."¹¹² The leadership of the Volksbund understood this letter and this final sentence to be in effect a state commission for its work.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ See: Heinrich August Winkler, "Western Alliance Controversy: FRG to 1953," in *Germany the Long Road West 1933-1990* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 131-141.

¹¹⁰ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 318.

¹¹¹ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 318.

¹¹² Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 319.

¹¹³ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 319.

It was this context that made the Volksbund's status as a private organization useful to Konrad Adenauer. Although much of his foreign policy was in pursuit of supra-national aims, he still governed over a predominantly nationalist constituency. As a private organization with a state mandate, the Volksbund could pursue nation to nation reconciliation and ultimately secure the existence of German war graves abroad. Adenauer gave the Volksbund his support, so that West Germany could claim this was not a state organization and thus could negotiate on its own. There was little doubt to West Germany's western neighbors that what the Volksbund was pursuing, especially in these early post-war years, had nationalist motivations behind them. On one hand, it was perhaps more tolerable that the desire to commemorate German war graves was coming from a private organization and not a state entity. On the other hand, the negotiations over war graves granted new opportunities to pursue European integration, or more often the case, for these states to pursue their own national, commemorative goals, which will be covered more in depth in later on in this chapter.

The Volksbund also steadily increased its influence through the establishment of the Federal President's official patronage (*Schirmherrschaft*) of the Volksbund in 1952. The Federal President's role as patron was mainly ceremonial. The President delivered the keynote speech at the annual *Volkstrauertag* ceremony, but the Volksbund also hoped to rely on the President's political support for its many projects abroad. Just as the President was supposed to remain above political partisanship as head of state, the Volksbund considered its own work as apolitical during this era. The president's patronage contributed considerably to giving the activities of the Volksbund, both at home and abroad, a veneer of state sanction.

With the exception of Gustav Heinemann in 1972, every *Bundespräsident* accepted the role as patron of the Volksbund.¹¹⁴

Starting in the 1950s, the Volksbund also relied on a loose political faction within the Bundestag and at the state level that it called the Parliamentary Ring, which consisted of representatives interested in the care of war graves. The Volksbund relied on this group for support on political questions related to its work.¹¹⁵ The Parliamentary Ring included members from all parties represented in the Bundestag and its members met irregularly to advise the Volksbund and resolve politically motivated disputes between members. As a part private- and part state-run and financed organization, it was in the interest of the Volksbund to foster an atmosphere of cooperation with and among policymakers, which it often promoted through organized trips to grave and memorial sites both in West Germany and abroad.

With its relationship with the new West German state firmly established, the Volksbund now expand its real work abroad. In the 1950s and 60s, Germany concluded its war grave agreements with Western or non-aligned states of Europe where many German graves were located, some dead from both World Wars: Luxemburg 1952; Norway 1953; Belgium 1954; Netherlands 1954; Italy 1955; Great Britain and the states of the British Commonwealth 1956; Finland 1959; Denmark 1962; Greece 1965; France 1966. These agreements identified the Volksbund as the sole mandated representative of the federal government to care for the German war graves abroad.¹¹⁶ Having an organizational counterpart, such as the Imperial War Graves Commission in Great Britain, Norwegian War

¹¹⁴ President Heinemann's rejection of the role as the Volksbund's patron had less to do with any negative feelings towards the organization, but more his own personal discomfort with formal state ceremonies. He seldom attended any formal state ceremonies, and famously received other heads of states and diplomats in informal settings, such as his private home rather than in the Presidential residence. His refusal to show up to *Volkstrauertag* ceremonies annoyed the Volksbund and strained its relationship with President Heinemann somewhat. Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 312.

¹¹⁵ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund* 315.

¹¹⁶ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 323.

Graves Commission, or the Dutch War Grave Foundation (*Nederlandse Oorlogsgravenstichting*), helped to facilitate negotiations between the Foreign Office in Bonn, the Volksbund, and the other governments of Western Europe. All the war grave agreements of the early and mid-1950s were in countries that had an organization similar to the Volksbund. The states with which negotiations lasted well into the 1960s did not.

The negotiation and conclusion of these agreements were by no means a forgone conclusion even with Western Europe warming up to West Germany's new post-war political and economic role. Reconciliation on an issue such as the care of fallen Wehrmacht soldiers was a whole other issue. The Volksbund leadership seemed to underestimate the extent to which the social and political consequences the Second World War had hindered its work. The atrocities by the Nazis and the German armed forces against civilians and prisoners of war across Europe placed the willingness of even Western nations to work with the Volksbund into question.

The first years of the Volksbund's work outside divided Germany could be best described as defensive, reactionary, and fearful of grave erasure out of revenge - an unspoken acknowledgement of Nazi crimes among leaders and members. Fears of retribution from Germany's former enemies were pervasive among the Volksbund members. This was especially the case among the expellee community, who joined the Volksbund in large numbers. The anxieties of German expellees influenced the Volksbund. The graves of German communities in East Prussia, Pomerania, and Silesia represented a continued presence of German memory and loved ones in the lost eastern territories. Expellees and later returning POWs from the Soviet Union spoke of violence against grave sites almost as often as against living Germans. Rumors of grave erasure contributed to the increasing sense among some West Germans of a unique national victimhood at the hands of the Soviet

victors, thus helping to establish anti-Communism as a key motivator to protect German graves in Eastern Europe.

In the West, the Volksbund made appeals to higher “Christian morals of the Occident” to encourage former victims and adversaries to not take revenge on German graves.¹¹⁷ In Fall 1945, Danish nationalists destroyed German monuments and headstones in D ppler Schanzen (Danish *Dybb l skanser*), a location in Southern Denmark that marked the defeat of Danish forces by Prussia in 1864.¹¹⁸ In another incident in 1946, a Danish pastor published an article in the church periodical *Praestebladet* that received wide public attention as he called for the “destruction of German graves” to “deter the next invasion of German interlopers on Danish soil.”¹¹⁹

In Norway in October 1952, another controversy erupted when the Norwegian parliament decided to dissolve the war-time Wehrmacht cemetery Ekeberg in Oslo and transfer the remains to new location outside the city. The parliament reached this decision after seven years of controversy surrounding the cemetery among the residents of Oslo and protests from the Volksbund for the government’s perceived inaction in protecting the graves.¹²⁰ The Volksbund enjoyed close relationship with the Lutheran church in Norway, the Norwegian Red Cross, and the Norwegian War graves association, but this alone was not enough to protect the Ekeberg cemetery.¹²¹ Volksbund President Wilhelm Ahlhorn complained about the “German-hating attitude of the Norwegian public sphere since Summer

¹¹⁷ Letter to the Volksbund Nienburg/Weser 29.09.1949, EZA 6/4391.

¹¹⁸ “Brief von VDK Dr. Fritz Debus an Herrn v. Hentig im kirchlichen Au enamt der EKD,” 23.07.1949, EZA 6/4391.

¹¹⁹ The pastor attempted to play on the recent memories of German expellees occupying Danish homes, schools, hospitals, and factories as they fled the Red Army. These appropriations occurred while many Danes starved, froze, or labored in concentration camps in the war’s final months, hardening anti-German sentiments among Danes; Attachment to “Brief von VDK Dr. Fritz Debus an Herrn v. Hentig im kirchlichen Au enamt der EKD,” 23.07.1949,“ EZA 6/4391.

¹²⁰ Excerpt of the Norwegian government’s plea printed in the VDK’s pamphlet for the 1952 Volkstrauertag, BArch BW 48/279.

¹²¹ “Brief von President Ahlhorn an den Vorsitzenden des Verbandes Deutscher Soldaten Niedersachsen 15.08.1952,“ pg 2, BArch BW 48.279.

1945” and regretted that this “political antipathy has extended to everything German, even war graves.”¹²²

Veterans’ associations were often more than willing to lend the Volksbund political support, especially in the service of memorializing their fallen comrades abroad. In a letter to a veterans group in Lower Saxony explaining the controversy, President Ahlhorn complained that there were “always certain press outlets in Norway demanding the dissolution of the largest German war cemetery in Norway, the Ekeberg.”¹²³ Ahlhorn cited that cooperation with Norwegian officials was in the spirit of “Christian altruism” but “only recently Oslo students ripped down the wooden crosses of German graves, burned them, and removed bronze tablets as well.”¹²⁴ President Ahlhorn and the Volksbund leadership perceived the Norwegian government’s decision to dissolve and relocate the cemetery as giving into “terrorist actions” and just a continuation of what they perceived as anti-German actions.¹²⁵ The Volksbund continued its protest against the action even though they were ultimately powerless to stop it. However, once the reburials were underway, the Volksbund was able to participate and were satisfied with the condition and design of the new location outside Oslo at Alfaset.

Reconciliation proved especially difficult in the Netherlands. In 1947 the Dutch government decided to establish a single cemetery for the scattered German war dead in its territory and located it close to the border so it “did not take up any valuable cultural land.”¹²⁶ The cemetery was to hold the remains of 31,000 Wehrmacht soldiers, fallen during allied

¹²² “Brief von President Ahlhorn an den Vorsitzenden des Verbandes Deutscher Soldaten Niedersachsen 15.08.1952,“ pg 2, BArch BW 48.279.

¹²³ “Brief von President Ahlhorn an den Vorsitzenden des Verbandes Deutscher Soldaten Niedersachsen 15.08.1952,“ pg 2, BArch BW 48.279.

¹²⁴ “Brief von President Ahlhorn an den Vorsitzenden des Verbandes Deutscher Soldaten Niedersachsen 15.08.1952,“ pg 3, BArch BW 48.279.

¹²⁵ “Brief von President Ahlhorn an den Vorsitzenden des Verbandes Deutscher Soldaten Niedersachsen 15.08.1952,“ pg 3, BArch BW 48.279.

¹²⁶ Christine Gundermann, *Die versöhnten Bürger: Der Zweite Weltkrieg in deutsch-niederländischen Begegnungen 1945-2000* (Münster: 2014), 333.

operations in September 1944 and the Ardennes offensive in December 1944. 300 were Dutch soldiers who had joined the SS and several Dutch Citizens who were arrested as collaborators at the end war and died in captivity – a permanent reminder of their collaboration. The chosen location was Ysselsteyn in the community of Venray close to the German border. The villagers thought that the remains of the German soldiers would be reburied in German territory after a short time.¹²⁷ Rumors soon spread to Volksbund circles that the villagers grew impatient, exhumed the remains themselves and dumped them on the Dutch-German border. These proved to be false and another early example of the Volksbund's post-war anxiety over the security of German war graves abroad.

The Netherlands experienced a brutal occupation under the German army, and commemorating German war graves was the last thing on most Dutch minds. The Netherlands suffered 200,000 killed against a pre-war population of 8.7 million. The Dutch War Graves Commission, a pre-war partner to the Volksbund, worked with the Volksbund out of professionalism, but with little enthusiasm. German born Josef Oechsle, who had long since lived in the Netherlands, acted as authorized representative of the Volksbund after 1949 and worked closely with the consulate in Amsterdam and Dutch War Graves Commission. Oechsle often explained to his contacts at the Volksbund how much the Netherlands had suffered under the German occupation, and that the Wehrmacht had behaved "ingloriously" in punishing resistance fighters, adding "it is understandable that the authorities do not give any instructions to look after the graves of [German] soldiers."¹²⁸

Oechsle's warning found little understanding within the Volksbund. Its leaders argued that a "civilized people must - despite the war of aggression - follow a certain ethos towards

¹²⁷ Gundermann, *Die versöhnten Bürger*, 334.

¹²⁸ He also detailed in this letter how German secret police and Wehrmacht soldiers tortured and brutally murdered Dutch resistance fighters before unceremoniously burying them in unmarked mass graves in the countryside; Brief von Josef Oechsle an den Volksbund am 09.06.1950, Volksbund Archiv A. 100-136.

their neighbors as a former enemy to be able to count themselves among the civilized peoples.”¹²⁹ With this line of reasoning, the Volksbund deliberately positioned itself as civilian in contrast to the military origins of its existence, and the German dead soldiers appeared as victims of Dutch revenge. Rather than former perpetrators, The Volksbund placed the German Wehrmacht as post-war victims. In 1952, in the middle of the German-Dutch war graves negotiations, the Dutch government did not agree to grant the Volksbund custodianship for the Ysselsteyn cemetery. The Dutch did not trust the Volksbund keeping it from becoming a Nazi pilgrimage site on Dutch territory. In 1954 the Dutch and West German governments – the latter of which was represented by the Volksbund - signed their war graves treaty, but ultimate long-term care for Ysselsteyn remained uncertain.¹³⁰

In Greece, the rumors that Greek citizens had neglected or outright looted and destroyed German war graves were somewhat true. Volksbund officials conducted a six-week survey of grave sites on both the Greek mainland and islands and described their overall condition as “devastating.”¹³¹ In two cemeteries, local Greek citizens removed the German dead from their graves, replaced them with fallen Greek soldiers. They created a “Greek heroes cemetery” through the repurposing of German gravestones and other structures of the cemetery. The remains of the German dead were found “carelessly thrown together in a nearby ditch without even the effort of covering them with earth.”¹³²

¹²⁹ Gundermann, *Die versöhnten Bürger*, 338.

¹³⁰ “Bericht über Besprechungen in Den Haag 19.-22.,03,1958,” BArch N 14/188. Until 1976, the only memorial ceremony allowed was the yearly Volkstrauertag service organized by a pastor of the German-protestant community in the Hague named Kraetzke, keeping the ceremony in Ysselsteyn in a Christian context with as little national Pathos as possible. Not until 1976 did the Volksbund receive full administration and care of the cemetery at Ysselsteyn. The Volkstrauertag ceremony then fell line with other military cemeteries abroad under the Volksbund’s care – complete with a band and guard clad in military uniform, wreath laying, raising the West German flag, and the singing of the German national anthem, followed by *Ich hatt einen Kameraden*, an old Prussian military anthem; Gundermann, *Die versöhnten Bürger*, 338.

¹³¹ “Brief des VDKs an das Kirchliche Außenamt der EKD, 28.06.1952,” EZA 6/4391.

¹³² “Brief des VDKs an das Kirchliche Außenamt der EKD, 28.06.1952,” EZA 6/4391.

The destruction of cemeteries containing the remains of perceived foreigners was not a new strategy to assert Greek nationhood. In the aftermath of the Balkan wars 1912-13 and during the First World War, a series of euphemistically designated “population exchanges” occurred between the Balkan nation-states and the Ottoman empire, in which ethnic minorities were brutally expelled. In Greece, nationalists drove tens of thousands of Muslim Turks from Greek lands, destroying centuries old Mosques and Muslim cemeteries in the process. Again, in December 1942, Nazi officials in the city of Salonica (Thessaloniki today) spurred on the destruction of the Jewish cemetery, the largest in Europe with 300,000 - 500,000 graves, by Greek nationalists. This preceded the annihilation of Salonica’s two and half thousand-year-old Jewish community, numbering over 54,000. In years that followed, the desecrated tomb stones were used as building material in the construction of local fortifications, roads, and even the Greek Orthodox Hagios Demetrios Basilica.¹³³

Yet, ethnic Greeks had enough of their own suffering during the Second World War. Greece lost 400,000 of its citizens against a pre-war population of 7.3 million and suffered widespread damage to its infrastructure and economy under German occupation. A brutal civil war then followed 1946-49 where an additional 158,000 were killed. With so much dead from both wars, local Greek citizens removed the German dead from their graves, replaced them with fallen Greek soldiers, tossing the remains in nearby ditches. They thereby converted Wehrmacht cemeteries, well cared for during the occupation, into “Greek heroes cemetery” through the repurposing of German gravestones and other structures of the cemetery.¹³⁴ The Greek Red Cross assisted the Volksbund in relocating the approximately 15,000 German remains scattered over 174 locations to two sites – the Xenia monastery near Volos and the Genia monastery on the island of Crete to end the pillaging.¹³⁵

¹³³ See: Mark Mazower, “Greeks and Jews,” in *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1430-1950* (First American edition: Knopf, 2005), 375-391.

¹³⁴ Brief des VDKs an das Kirchliche Außenamt der EKD, 28.06.1952,” EZA 6/4391.

¹³⁵ “Aufzeichnung – Deutsch-griechische Kriegsgräberabkommen,” 17.12.1964, BArch B 136/5065.

The Greek government refused to support the construction of permanent German military cemeteries until it settled some sort of post-war agreement with West Germany. Many in Athens saw a connection between the care of war graves and reparations. Eliding the war graves and reparations issues, West Germany promoted the investment of hundreds of millions of West German Marks into Greek infrastructure projects and advocated for its integration into the European Economic Community and NATO. In addition, starting in 1960, West Germany invited around 100,000 Greek guest workers yearly, which boosted Germany's economy, relieved Greece's high unemployment, and began the flow of emigrant remittances into Greece to stimulate its economy. In 1963, the Greek parliament agreed to draft a war graves agreement. Despite assurances by the Greek Red Cross to the Volksbund, the Greek parliament delayed ratifying it. The West German foreign office interpreted these stalling tactics "as a way to disrupt Greek-German relations."¹³⁶ It believed nationalist and "crypto-communist"¹³⁷ fractions of the Greek parliament brought up questions of reparations and to push for assurances that a monument to Greek victims of the Nazis would be erected in West Germany. The construction of the two planned cemeteries in Raffina near Athens and Maleme on Crete stalled as a result.

Due to the long bloody struggle of the Greek Civil War and continued political struggles between Western backed national conservatives and the Soviet backed communist party, memories of the brutal German occupation faded away in favor of the recent threats by

¹³⁶ "Aufzeichnung – Deutsch-griechische Kriegsgräberabkommen," 17.12.1964, BArch B 136/5065.

¹³⁷ The term "crypto-communist" has a larger context within modern Greek history. Following the defeat of communist forces in the Greek Civil War, many leaders and activists fled abroad or went underground, leading to accusations of secret communist cells by far-right Greek paramilitary groups known as National Guard Defense Bands (*Tagmata Ethnofilakis Aminis*) or TEA or informal gangs called *Parakratos* to unleash periodic waves of violence and flush out secret communists. Giorgios Papandreou, prime minister of Greece 1964-65, was a center right reformer who attempted to disband these far-right groups, but his own party used the term to delegitimize left-wing criticism of his policies. Following Papandreou's attempt to disarm the TEAs, the army accused him of "crypto communism" which triggered the coup in the Summer of 1965. See: Mogens Pelt, *Tying Greece to the West: US-West German-Greek Relations 1949-1974. Studies in 20th & 21st Century European History*, (Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 270-85.

Greece's Slavic communist neighbors Albania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. Greece's regional struggle with Turkey over Cyprus also encouraged the Greek government to seek support from powerful Western allies, notably France, the United States, and especially West Germany. Greece, like West Germany, perceived itself as western enclave on the front lines in the struggle against communism.¹³⁸ In early 1965, Greek Prime minister Giorgios Papandreou rejected calls from his party and the opposition for a new round of negotiations for greater "German reciprocity" and proclaimed that "the future of both Greece and humanity must be built on forgetting and not reminiscing."¹³⁹ NATO solidarity and continued West German investment in Greece proved greater prizes than the promise of reparations. The Greek parliament ratified the war graves agreement and twenty years after the end of the war the Volksbund finally began the construction of its two permanent war cemeteries in Greece.

The largest and most drawn-out project for the Volksbund in the 1950s was securing the care and protection of German war graves in France – where 768,000 graves of the First World War and 280,000 graves from the Second World War are located, the largest number outside the Soviet Union. It also proved the most difficult in Western Europe. Not until 1966, over twenty years after the end of the war did West Germany finally conclude reach a formal agreement with France. One obvious reason for the difficulty were the reservations among many French officials about working with an organization associated with the Nazis. One French protestant pastor, a previous contact of the Volksbund during the interwar period, wrote the Volksbund and explained "why he rejects any work with the Volksbund." He remembered the "[Volksbund General Manager Otto] Margraf's disagreeable presence in Paris as General Secretary during the occupation" and that Volksbund founder [Siegfried]

¹³⁸ Mogens Pelt, *Tying Greece to the West: US-West German-Greek Relations 1949-1974. Studies in 20th & 21st Century European History*, (Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 230-2.

¹³⁹ Teleprinted communication between AA Bonn and German embassy Athens 02.03.1965, BArch B 136/5065

Emmo Eulen was “*von ganzem Herzen*” a Nazi.¹⁴⁰ Otto Margraf visited the Ministry of Veteran’s Affairs in Paris in 1951 and reportedly received an unpleasant reception.¹⁴¹ Finding support even among pre-war contacts in France was not assured.

The Volksbund did not trust the French government, nor most foreign governments at that time, to properly care for German war graves without their oversight and intervention. The Volksbund usually preferred that Germans held the stewardship of German war graves abroad. According to Volksbund President Ahlhorn, contractors commissioned by the French interior ministry “hacked hundreds of corpses in two in order to double the number of reburials on paper to receive a higher compensation for their work, and placed thousands of false grave markers, thereby erasing the identity of the dead.¹⁴²” The Volksbund leadership claimed that such a scandal would not have happened if Germans had been present. Moreover, six years after the war, people were still finding German war dead in fields, forests, canals, often revealed after a hard rain.¹⁴³ These same issues occurred in France and Poland in the early 1920s but took only a few years to remedy. In 1958 the Volksbund’s executive board sent a memorandum to its regional branches, pushing for the care of German war graves by Germans: “The German public categorically dismissed the responsibility of foreign states...this is a question of a fundamental duty of honor that cannot be passed on to another nation, let alone a former enemy.”¹⁴⁴

The Volksbund leadership developed a less defensive and more cosmopolitan approach to win French support. The Volksbund turned to a pre-war network of supporters who shared a new conservative pan-European vision for the future of the continent. One of the most influential contacts was Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi. Born in Tokyo in 1894

¹⁴⁰ Letter to Pastor de Beaulieu in German translation without date, Volksbund Archiv A. 10-160.

¹⁴¹ Letter to Pastor de Beaulieu in German translation without date, Volksbund Archiv A. 10-160.

¹⁴² Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 322.

¹⁴³ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 322.

¹⁴⁴ “Memorandum” of the Volksbund Board 17.12.1958, BArch NL 1219.105.

to an Austrian-Czech Aristocrat and the daughter of a Japanese Oil magnate, Count Coudenhove became known for his 1923 publication *The Pan-European Manifest*, which strove to replace the racially based *Volksgemeinschaft* of conservative circles with a vision of an ethnically diverse Europe united in a common culture. He also became the leader of the Pan-European movement of the interwar years and enjoyed considerable influence among the political circles of Europe, courting notable leaders such as Gustav Stresemann, Aristide Briand, and Edvard Benes. Count Coudenhove publicly denounced the spread of anti-Semitism in 1933, considering Jews to be part of the European community, and became a French citizen in 1939. After the war, the count saw the opportunity to build a new political foundation for Europe.¹⁴⁵

In 1952, another prominent member of the Volksbund's executive board, Konstantin von Beguelin met with Count Coudenhove in Bonn to garner his support for the Volksbund. During the conversation, the two "agreed that the soldier's grave was particularly suitable for building a bridge from one nation to another. The soldiers of all nations will not have fallen in vain if their sacrificial death had contributed to the war ultimately leading to a unification of Europe." Count Coudenhove took up this idea with great zeal, seeing it as "another building block for the ideas he had advocated for years." Count Coudenhove contacted General Antoine Bethouart, the former French High Commissioner in Austria, who not only agreed with the idea, but became a prominent Volksbund spokesman within the French military. He arranged to have von Beguelin meet with the Minister of Veterans Affairs Emmanuel Temple in September 1952.¹⁴⁶ The meeting was the breakthrough the Volksbund needed, and the first test of its new commemorative approach. Konstantin von Beguelin commented afterwards that, "the minister and his cabinet chief fully agreed with what I had

¹⁴⁵ Eagle Glassheim, *Noble Nationalists: The Transformation of The Bohemian Aristocracy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pg 113.

¹⁴⁶ "Bericht über eine Zusammentreffen mit Minister Temple vom Ministere des Anciens Combattant," BArch BW 48/279.

said, affirmed it, and promised to push things forward for their part.”¹⁴⁷ With support in the French veteran’s bureaucracy, the Volksbund began its real work in France and started to formalize a war graves agreement.

Notably missing from this meeting, and any of the Volksbund’s negotiations with the states of Western Europe, was any discussion of Nazi crimes against Europe’s ethnic minorities, notably Jews and Roma. Franco-German collaboration during the war notably led to the infamous *Velodrome d’Hiver* roundup, where the Gestapo led 9000 French policemen, assisted by 3000 Fascist French volunteers, to arrest a planned 28,000 Jews in Paris and its surrounding areas in July 1942. Most French Jews were tipped off about the coming action and went into hiding, but over 13,000 were arrested, housed in the famous bicycling arena known as the *Velodrome d’Hiver*.¹⁴⁸ What followed was their deportation to Auschwitz, where all but 400 were murdered upon arrival. French collaboration was also crucial in locating and arresting France’s scattered Roma population, numbering around 40,000 and living in smaller, rural communities – otherwise inaccessible to Nazi officials.¹⁴⁹ The Nazis murdered around 15,000 French Romani by 1944. Beguelin’s meeting with French officials emphasized the need for Germany to reconcile nation to nation, but nowhere is this meeting or in the text of the war graves agreement of 1966 was there a single mention of reconciling with Europe’s surviving persecuted minorities.¹⁵⁰ France’s role according to the transcript of Beguelin’s meeting and the eventual Franco-German war graves agreement, was that of valiant battlefield opponent and eventual victor of the Second World War.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ “Bericht über eine Zusammentreffen mit Minister Temple vom Ministere des Anciens Combattant,” BArch BW 48/279.

¹⁴⁸ Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, First Harvard University Press paperback edition, (Harvard University Press, 1994), 140.

¹⁴⁹ “Genocide of European Roma, 1939-1945,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified July 23, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/genocide-of-european-roma-gypsies-1939-1945>.

¹⁵⁰ “Gräberabkommen mit Frankreich, 1966,” BArch N 24/178.

¹⁵¹ “Bericht über eine Zusammentreffen mit Minister Temple vom Ministere des Anciens Combattant,” BArch BW 48/279.

Even the Dutch government, which had been quite uneasy in its negotiations with the Volksbund in the early 1950s, also avoided the topics of Jewish victims and collaboration. Such a discussion would have brought up the sensitive subject of Dutch participation the SS and Gestapo, the Netherlands' domestic fascist movement. Between 22,000 and 25,000 Dutchmen volunteered to join the SS, and membership in the Dutch fascist party – the NSB – peaked at 100,000 by 1942.¹⁵² That same year in September, the commissioner general of Nazi occupied Netherlands SS-Obergruppenführer Hanns Rauter bragged to Heinrich Himmler that he has met so many “friendly Dutchmen” through the NSB, who helped arrest and transport 40,000 Jews to the Westerbork and Vught transit camps, before their final journey to the gas chambers of Auschwitz.¹⁵³ Yet, the language of the 1952 war graves agreement with West Germany had a similar tone to the Franco-West German agreement of 1966 – two nations reconciling after a conventional war. The only difference is that the 1954 agreement made a few general references to “heroic Dutch resistance fighters” and Dutch civilian victims.¹⁵⁴

When the Greek parliament debated the war graves agreement with West Germany in 1965, there was also no mention of Jewish victims. Greco-German collaboration during the war had led to the destruction of one of Europe's largest and oldest Jewish communities in Salonika. In July 1941, the Nazis forced Salonika's Jewish community of 60,000 into a compact ghetto. Meanwhile – as mentioned previously - Greek nationalists dismantled the Europe's largest Jewish cemetery, numbering nearly 500,000 graves to make room for urban expansion and to reuse tombstones as building material. In 1943 Nazi forces and their Greek auxiliaries deported 48,000 of Salonika's 60,000 Jews to Auschwitz, and another 4000 to

¹⁵² N. K. C. A. in 't Veld, *De SS en Nederland: Documenten uit SS-Archieven 1933-1944*, (Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, 1976), 406.

¹⁵³ Letter from SS-Obergruppenführer Hanns Rauter to SS-Reichskommissar Heinrich Himmler, Sept 10, 1942, in N. K. C. A. in 't Veld, *De SS en Nederland: Documenten uit SS-Archieven 1933-1944*, (Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, 1976), 817-821.

¹⁵⁴ “Gräberabkommen mit den Niederlanden, 1952,” BArch N 24/178.

Treblinka between March and August 1943. By the end of the war, only around 6000 Jews of Salonika had survived the war, either by fleeing the ghetto, joining the Greek resistance, or surviving in various labor camps.¹⁵⁵ For the vast majority who were murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Treblinka, cremated, and their ashes scattered, there were no graves to be commemorated. The Volksbund, the West German Foreign Office, the Greek Red Cross, and the Greek parliament never mentioned any of this history during the many negotiations and debates that surrounded the Greek-West German war graves agreement. Nation to nation reconciliation – as if the Second World War had been a conventional conflict – remained the focus of these war grave agreements.¹⁵⁶

It was from these meetings that the Volksbund developed the commemorative program behind its slogan *Versöhnung über den Gräbern* or “Reconciliation over the Graves.” Despite its conservative-nationalist origins in Germany, the idea resonated more broadly in European circles than one might have anticipated. The commemorative approach attempted to place all traditional, national commemorative cultures on an equal basis, promoted international reconciliation, and, perhaps most importantly for the Volksbund, retain the privileged position in collective memory for combat deaths. The Volksbund created a commemorative approach that was based on the memory of soldiers who fought and died for their respective nations as heroes, regardless of victory or defeat. Such an approach produced a positive discourse of mutual respect and honor. By this metric, unpleasant discussions about the Second World War’s atrocities, whether it was the perpetration or complicity in war crimes in Germany, the bombing of civilian centers, or collaboration in France and other Nazi-occupied states, only served to divide Europe into perpetrators and victims – for whom honor was impossible. The result was a conservative strategy to unifying

¹⁵⁵ See: Mark Mazower, “Genocide,” in *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1430-1950* (First American edition: Knopf, 2005), 392-411.

¹⁵⁶ “Griechisches Gräberabkommen, 1965,” BArch N 24/178.

Europe, and one that called for avoiding discussions of the war's darker historical truths that could undermine, question, or criticize national commemorative cultures.

The success of its commemorative narrative during the 1950s and 1960s was due to its willingness to recognize and accommodate the nationalist commemorations and myths of other European nation-states. "Reconciliation over the Graves" served West German myths as much as did French and Dutch myths regarding resistance and collaboration. Thus, the Volksbund pursued a strategy that made room for the co-existence of multiple national interests. It was the first step of a long process in integrating European memories of the Second World War within a conservative framework. The Volksbund was more willing to meet with representatives of European nation-states, once belligerent states towards Germany, on a basis of mutual respect – that the fallen on both sides fought honorably and deserved to be honored with perpetual care and memorialization – rather than with groups that represented ethnic, racial, religious, or social minorities persecuted by the Nazis. This aspect of the Volksbund's work was the culmination of a shift in European memorial practices from those of the early nineteenth century and required a large degree of separation between post-war memorialization narratives and the crimes of the Nazis. The governments of Western Europe were willing to accept this arrangement even when some segments of their respective societies did not. The fact that this paralleled Konrad Adenauer's policy of *Westbindung*, West German rearmament, and entry into NATO was no coincidence. At the conclusion of the Greek parliament's ratification of the German-Greek War Graves Agreement in March 1965, Prime Minister Giorgios Papandreou proclaimed that "the Greek government and the majority of the parliament [a centrist coalition] no longer associate today's Germany with the Nazi era and its crimes."¹⁵⁷ This proclamation followed two years

¹⁵⁷ "Aufzeichnung – Deutsch-griechische Kriegsgräberabkommen," 05.03.1965, BArch B 136/5065.

of debates and other stalling tactics during which members of parliament expressed the exact opposite image of contemporary Germany.

The Volksbund's sensitivity to rumors of violence towards German war graves also revealed an insecurity regarding its understanding of West Germany's new place in Europe. States such as Norway, Denmark, and France were supposed to be the West Germany's closest allies in the current struggle against communism, and yet it could not count on these same populations not to desecrate the gravesites. The Volksbund perceived grave desecration as an ultimate insult to the defeated Germans, and – whether consciously or not – separated that from the context of Nazi atrocities and the fact that most of their victims did not receive proper burial. Volksbund's leaders feared that if they faced this much resistance in the West, there was little hope of saving graves in the East where both the recent past and the new Cold War division of Europe could justify the erasure of the grave sites. The Volksbund's anxieties also indirectly showed the Volksbund's own tacit awareness that German armed forces did not act as honorably as their commemorative rhetoric suggested and Germans had committed crimes against civilians that merited such vengeance. The denial of this reality informed the Volksbund's approach. It engaged its partners with the mindset as a nation defeated on the battlefield that now sought out reconciliation with the victors, rather than as perpetrators asking for forgiveness from their victims. "Reconciliation over the Graves" was the solution that the Volksbund pursued. Meetings between Volksbund officials and statesmen of considerable influence, such as Count Coudenhove-Kalergi, and war grave negotiations that took place throughout Europe, contributed to the rehabilitation of West Germany among the allied governments of Western Europe. This approach intended to validate the German experience of and desire after defeat – that Germans, West and East, could still be proud and honor their fallen dead without the ignominy war crimes. It was an avenue to recognition among the community of nations in the post-world war settlement.

Accessing War Graves in the East

While most of the Volksbund focused on pursuing West Germany's integration into the West, some key actors within the Volksbund attempted to access war graves in Eastern Europe despite the Cold War divide. Much like in Western Europe in the first post-war years, the Volksbund was completely dependent on the information and limited measures taken by some private individuals and church officials in Eastern Europe. However, the goal for Eastern Europe was not "Reconciliation over the Graves" with Germany's former enemies, but simply to access German war graves by any means. The German war graves question in the East became simply another means to wage the Cold War. The Volksbund's leaders wanted to access these graves for primarily nationalist interests and sought any possible avenue to those ends.

The Volksbund had previously worked in interwar Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and even the Soviet Union to care for the scattered graves from the First World War. Its interwar contacts in Eastern Europe, mostly protestant pastors and ethnic Germans, had either been killed, expelled, or were no longer willing to risk contact with the Volksbund following the Second World War. In the case of Poland, described by one specialist on Poland to the Volksbund leadership in January 1961, "Protestant = German. This is particularly true at the present time and applies to Protestant Christians of Polish nationality."¹⁵⁸ Polish Catholics perceived Protestants as pro-German traitors, while the Communist regime sought to persecute all forms of organized religion. Since Protestants were now a small minority in Poland, many of whom had German ancestry, they were vulnerable to both pressures. Thus, previous contacts among the Polish protestants were no longer able – or willing – to be Volksbund partners in the new post-war world.

¹⁵⁸ "Aktenvermerk Referat Ost Volksbund, Kassel den 03.02.1961," N 24/181.

The Volksbund had to cultivate new institutional partners and contacts to bypass the diplomatic standoff between East and West and to learn of the fate of German war graves. As it began these efforts, the Volksbund recognized that simply appealing to reconciliation remained a far-off goal. In Poland, the Volksbund tried multiple vectors – Communist officials in Warsaw, the Polish Red Cross, and the Catholic Church – all of which proved to be dead ends. The Soviet Union was only case where some diplomatic channels were open. For the rest of Central and Southeastern Europe, the Volksbund looked to the *Österreichisches Schwarzes Kreuz* (Austrian Black Cross) or ÖSK to build a new network. The extent of its cooperation in this region, however, was limited. The ÖSK was founded in 1919 after the fall of the Habsburg monarchy and the breakup of the Austrian multi-national state. The founders attempted to create a war graves service reminiscent of this previous political reality with regional organizations across the former Habsburg lands, using imperial memory as the basis for institutional connection across a post-imperial space. Unfortunately for the ÖSK, as one Volksbund official described in 1959, “the existing differences between Vienna and the peoples who, after years of fighting, had finally shaken off the Habsburg yoke made such a solution impossible.”¹⁵⁹ The official referenced a longer process of de-imperialization rather than just post-war animosity of Austria’s role in the Axis. ÖSK headquarters in Vienna established and maintained contacts with former imperial army soldiers who retained a sense of camaraderie and nostalgia for the old Habsburg state. Yet, the ÖSK perceived that this network’s viability was limited to the lifespans of aging Habsburg loyalists.¹⁶⁰ These individuals were a starting point for the Volksbund in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia to learn the fates of German war graves

¹⁵⁹ Letter to General of the Infantry General Hossbach Subject: Österreichisches Schwarzes Kreuz, Kassel 23.11.1959, N 24.157.

¹⁶⁰ Letter to General of the Infantry General Hossbach Subject: Österreichisches Schwarzes Kreuz, Kassel 23.11.1959, N 24.157.

and to find individuals or institutions as potential partners. This network proved especially promising in Yugoslavia, which will be explored in chapter four.

There were some important exceptions of interwar contacts who continued their work after 1945 that merit being mentioned. In the first four years of the new socialist republic of Poland, a so called *Pfarreraktion* took place among thirty or forty protestant pastors in Poland who still maintained connections with Germany. They sent lists of old German cemeteries and war graves and reported on their conditions to the Volksbund. In Albania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Romania, the Volksbund commissioned Eugen Klethi, a Romanian with German ancestry who had been active in this region during the interwar period, to briefly resume his work in these states.¹⁶¹ Klethi reported on the state of German – and Austrian – graves of the First World War, and some scattered Second World War graves he happened to come across. In 1957, the Lutheran Church of Germany attempted to establish new church contacts for the Volksbund by passing along the addresses of the new Protestant and Catholic church leaderships in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, specifically the *Siebenbürgen* – a region of the Southern Carpathians with strong German roots dating back to the 12th century.¹⁶² From there, the Volksbund hoped to connect with new church officials who could at least keep an eye on the condition of German war graves in these states beyond the Iron Curtain. The most urgent assignment of this work in Eastern and Southeastern Europe was the registration and identification of unknown remains. If these sites were to be abandoned, desecrated, or flattened, there at least stood a chance that the remains could be rediscovered and given a proper burial later. Any work beyond this was impossible at the time since the Volksbund's access to these states was tied to West Germany's relationship with these Communist ruled states. The survival of these graves and

¹⁶¹ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 324.

¹⁶² "Brief an den Herrn Beauftragten des VDKs am Sitz der Bundesregierung von OKR Dr. Krüger, Kirchenausschuss-Ost Hannover, 22.11.1957," EZA 4/4392.

memorial sites were ultimately up to Germany's former enemies, victims, and West Germany's current ideological adversaries, which did not bode well from the Volksbund's point of view.

Former Wehrmacht General Friedrich Hossbach, a prominent member of the Volksbund's executive board, played a crucial role in building the Volksbund leadership's strategy towards Eastern Europe. He had also played a critical role in the Nazi attempt to create *Lebensraum* in the region during the Third Reich. General Hossbach authored the infamous Hossbach memorandum in 1937 while serving as a colonel and military adjutant to Adolf Hitler's inner circle. The memorandum outlined the strategic necessity to achieve "German autarky" through the annexation and economic exploitation of Eastern Europe.¹⁶³ Hossbach composed the memorandum based on his notes and recollections from Hitler's meeting with Field Marshall Werner von Blomberg, General Werner von Fritsch, Admiral Erich Raeder, Hermann Göring, and Konstantin von Neurath on November 5, 1937. Historians do not perceive Hossbach as having any intellectual influence on the memorandum's content and larger impact, especially considering that these views were not particularly new, but part of long-term plans for restructuring Eastern Europe toward German cultural and economic dominance. Friedrich Naumann, a liberal politician of the *Kaiserreich*

¹⁶³ The Hossbach memorandum sits at the center of the old intentionalist/ functionalist debate among scholars of the Holocaust and Second World War. Intentionalist historians, such as Andreas Hillburg and Gerhard Weinberg argued that the document demonstrated a clear intent to start a war within a general time frame and annex the territories of Eastern and Central Europe that the Nazis would capture in 1939 and 1941. Historians Hans Mommsen and Ian Kershaw argued that no such plan or time frame is present in the memorandum, but rather a series of vague conditions for war that reflected an *ad hoc* response to the diplomatic crises of 1937 as Hitler saw them. See: Hillgruber, Andreas. "England's Place In Hitler's Plans for World Dominion." *Journal of Contemporary History*, Volume 9, 1974. pp. 5–22; Weinberg, Gerhard. *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany Starting World War II*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 39–40; Kershaw, Ian. *The Nazi dictatorship: problems and perspectives of interpretation*. London: Oxford University Press, 2000; Mommsen, Hans. *Beamtenum Im Dritten Reich: Mit Ausgewählten Quellen Zur Nationalsozialistischen Beamtenpolitik*. Schriftenreihe Der Vierteljahreshefte Für Zeitgeschichte, Nr. 13. Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1976.

era, outlined such a plan in his 1915 book *Mitteleuropa*. Nonetheless, Hossbach's role in composing the memorandum remains significant.¹⁶⁴

Hossbach found himself at odds with the Nazi leadership more than once. In 1938, Hitler removed Hossbach from his inner circle after he had warned General Fritsch about a file containing accusations of homosexuality against him. Fritsch denied the accusations and Hossbach delivered the message personally to Hitler – a move that almost cost him his life.¹⁶⁵ Despite this, he advanced to the rank of General for commanding the 31st infantry division during the invasions of Poland and France. Hossbach also commanded the 82nd infantry during battle of Kursk in July and August 1943, and the LVI Panzer corps in the spring of 1944 during Germany's retreat through Ukraine and Belarus. General Hossbach took command of the Fourth Army in July 1944. In January 1945, he evacuated his army from East Prussia against Hitler's direct orders to avoid encirclement and annihilation by the Red Army. He was relieved of duty shortly thereafter and spent the remainder of the war in Göttingen. On April 8, just hours before American forces entered the city of Göttingen, a squad of Gestapo and SS officials attempted to arrest and execute General Hossbach for cowardice. Hossbach was warned beforehand while recovering at the University clinic in Göttingen from an ear infection and when the officers knocked on the door, he started to fire his sidearm from an upstairs balcony and engaged in a brief standoff. Fearing the advancing allies, the Gestapo and SS officers abandoned their task and General Hossbach surrendered himself to American forces moments later. According to the soldiers that apprehended Hossbach, they were rather pleased to have captured a general who had been against Hitler, but not so pleased when they discovered he was "an old school Prussian" who despised

¹⁶⁴ A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1965.

¹⁶⁵ William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960, 315.

democracy. He spent two years in an American POW camp and provided written testimony and evidence at the Nuremberg trials.¹⁶⁶

As a leading member of the Volksbund after the war, Friedrich Hossbach, who had actively helped the Nazis pursue their genocidal policies in the East, played a critical role in attempting to secure German war dead in Eastern Europe. In the minutes and protocols of executive board meetings, Hossbach was typically the most vocal on issues relating to accessing war graves in the East until his departure from the Volksbund in 1970. Board members and officials of *Referat Ost*, responsible for implementing the plans of the executive board and developing Volksbund strategies in the East, demonstrated a tendency to defer to General Hossbach's judgment on this issue. Undoubtedly, Hossbach wanted to ensure the German war dead, a substantial amount of whom likely died under his command, received proper burial and their service commemorated in the old military tradition.

General Hossbach and the Volksbund's engagement in Eastern Europe at the height of the Cold War might best be characterized primarily as an assertion of German nationalism abroad and as covert propaganda war for the West against Communism. To some limited degree, there was also an active and nuanced engagement with the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe. This region was the epicenter for the Nazi genocidal plan to reshape Europe. Nonetheless, reconciliation for the systematic murder of the Jews during the Holocaust did not play a major factor in these interactions for the Volksbund nor their Eastern European interlocutors. These socialist societies subsumed the Holocaust into narratives of fascist mass murder against the peoples of Europe. Communist regimes suppressed memories of Antisemitic violence in general to separate themselves from the popular idea of "Jewish-Bolsheviks" taking revenge against the nation and place all wartime crimes at the feet of

¹⁶⁶ Earl F. Ziemke, *Army Historical Series: The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany 1944-46*, (Washington D.C: Center for Military History US Army, 1975), 232-3, <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/occ-gy/ch14.htm>.

fascist invaders. Post-war communist regimes went so far as to silence Jewish accusations against former perpetrators and claims for expropriated property, and later persecute Jews within their own parties for “bourgeois cosmopolitanism” – leaning into classic left-wing Antisemitic tropes, such as the Slanski trial in Czechoslovakia, the trial of Paul Merker in East Germany, and the persecution of Ana Pauker in Romania. For the few Communist states that dealt with the Volksbund on the issue of German war grave commemoration, the victim was their nation of workers, without distinction of other ethnic or religious minorities.¹⁶⁷

The Volksbund was aware of these realities, and of the great atrocities German forces committed against the peoples of Eastern Europe, even as its leaders and members continued to react with shock at the desecration of German graves. Volksbund leaders, especially general Hossbach, took anti-German sentiment into consideration when planning which representatives to send to these countries, avoiding those that may be perceived as having a tainted past. Hossbach and the Volksbund leadership also considered which institutions and officials they contacted, whether they had suffered directly from the German occupation, and what rhetoric they used to engage with the East. Friedrich Hossbach and *Referat Ost* attempted contact with all Central and Eastern European states, but focused the most effort on the two states that held the most German war graves and were the targets of Nazi genocidal plans during the Second World War – Poland and the Soviet Union.

The Volksbund’s Failure in Poland

Next to East Germany, Poland resisted the Volksbund the most, and for deeper reasons than Cold War tensions. Poland, after the Soviet Union and France, held the largest number of German war graves. In addition, several former German territories annexed to the post-war Polish state contained centuries old communal German Protestant, cemeteries,

¹⁶⁷ See: Paul Hanebrink, “Chapter 5: Under Communist Rule,” in *A Spectre Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism*: (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 163-199.

which expellees demanded the Volksbund include within their mandate to care for graves abroad. To push the Volksbund towards this end, one expellee organization from Göttingen in 1959, for example, donated 300 DM to the Volksbund “for Germans in Polish occupied territories” with 75 DM to be set aside specifically for the son of one of their members who fell in Poland.¹⁶⁸ Minutes of the Volksbund’s *Referat Ost*’s meetings revealed that the leadership empathized with these demands and considered the lost territories as “under occupation” as much as the expellees did. However, tension over how to cooperate with Poles to access German war graves while also satisfying the expectations of the expellee community became the defining struggle of these early efforts. Indecision in this regard led the Volksbund to a dual strategy of accepting the support of the expellee community quietly, while publicly presenting themselves as apolitical, humanitarian, and separate from the demands of German expellees. In Poland, the Volksbund sought out the Red Cross and the Catholic church as partners, both of whom remained cautious of the Volksbund’s true intents.

Tensions between West Germany and the People’s Republic of Poland persisted through much of the Cold War, especially because Bonn refused to recognize the loss of East Pomerania, Western Prussia, and Silesia to Poland. This post-1945 contention was on top of a longer history of territorial tension since the creation of the modern Polish state after the First World War, when the victorious allies handed smaller portions of Silesia and Western Prussia, including the city of Danzig, to the nascent Polish state. Prior to this, Poles were also sensitive to the history of attempts to Germanize Polish speaking territories in the 19th century.¹⁶⁹ The Volksbund’s close connection to expellee organizations made its goal of

¹⁶⁸ “Aktenvermerk Referat Ost, Kassel 08.04.1959,“ BArch N 24/181.

¹⁶⁹ Prussian language and education policies prior to German unification elevated German language and culture, making German the language of elites and Polish a peasant language in regions where Poles comprised a demographic majority. Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf* targeted Poles first for their Catholicism, and second for their status as a national minority. Consequently, a popular phrase within Polish intellectual circles and Catholic clerics in the 19th century was *Jak z zimy nie bedzie lata, tak z Niemca nie bedzie brata* (As the Winter is to Summer, the German will never be a brother). Georg W. Strobel, “Die Kirche Polens, das gesellschaftliche Deutschensyndrom und beide Rollen bei der Sowjetisierung

successfully presenting its work as apolitical to potential Polish partners unlikely. The attempt did nothing to sway Polish officials that its goals were nothing more than continuing German territorial claims.

Little was achieved in making headway with Polish officials during the 1950s as most Volksbund efforts focused on Western Europe, or in trying to bring the Soviets to the table on the war graves issue. Only in August of 1957 did the Volksbund executive committee organize a trip for their delegates to West Berlin whose “purpose was above all to get in touch with the Polish military mission.”¹⁷⁰ A cultural attaché of the Volksbund, identified as Mr. Raczkowski, a German with Polish ancestry, made contact with the Polish military mission in Berlin and emphasized in his brief meeting “that the care of war graves was not only a human issue but also a cultural one and has nothing to do with politics.”¹⁷¹ The executive board did not state whether they saw this as an auspicious start, but considering no further steps were taken to reach out to Poland for another year, it was likely a dead end.

The language of the Volksbund – and of most Germans of the era – revealed its refusal to recognize post-war borders with Poland. In the summer of 1958, a member of *Referat Ost* named Neubauer traveled to “Bromberg, Danzig, and Posen” – today called Bydgoszcz, Gdansk, and Poznan.¹⁷² For the Volksbund and the expellee community, German graves in Poland broadly represented a continued territorial claim, or at least a right for expellees to return.¹⁷³ The Volksbund’s position as a private organization in West Germany

Polens,” in Karp, Hans-Jürgen, & Köhler, Joachim. *Katholische Kirche unter nationalsozialistischer und kommunistischer Diktatur: Deutschland und Polen 1939 – 1989: Forschungen und Quellen zur Kirchen- und Kulturgeschichte Ostdeutschlands*, Köln Weimar Wien, 2001, 105

¹⁷⁰ “Bericht über Besprechungen in Berlin vom 19. Bis 21.08.1957, Kassel den 27.08.1957,” BArch N 24/187.

¹⁷¹ “Bericht über Besprechungen in Berlin vom 19. Bis 21.08.1957, Kassel den 27.08.1957,” BArch N 24/187.

¹⁷² “Bericht über Besprechungen in Berlin vom 19. Bis 21.08.1957, Kassel den 27.08.1957,” BArch N 24/187.

¹⁷³ “Zu der Rechtslage der Frage der deutschen Kriegsgräber in Polen,” Referat Ost, Kassel 04.07.1960, BArch N 24/181.

privileged it with greater access at a private, individual level that furthered its claim of being non-political and dedicated only to humanitarian concerns. The strategy was effective in some instances, as will be explored in Yugoslavia in Chapter four, but not in Poland. Polish officials, Catholic clergy, and Poles in general, never really bought the argument due to the suspicion that the Volksbund was only a vehicle for expellee demands and revising Poland's western border.¹⁷⁴

The Volksbund first attempted to contact Polish state officials and affiliates as potential partners under the guise of humanitarianism. In April 1960, the Office for the Care of Foreign Graves in Warsaw refused direct cooperation with the Volksbund – the office provided no exact justification – and suggested that it work with the Polish Red Cross instead.¹⁷⁵ Friedrich Hossbach dispatched a representative, identified as Mr. Stiebeling, to Warsaw to speak with the Polish Red Cross directly. Hossbach explained that:

The purpose of the trip is exclusively to establish contact with the person responsible for war graves. No agreements or the like may be made. Contact should be limited to clarifying if the German war graves in old Poland were in good condition between the two world wars, could be repaired, or cared for. In the talks, questions that deal with or could concern the Oder-Neisse areas (eastern German areas under Polish administration) should be avoided at all costs... Under no circumstances should the question of a possible return of our dead to Germany be discussed.¹⁷⁶

Hossbach distinguished between “old Poland” and “eastern German areas under Polish administration,” demonstrating his clear opposition to Poland's post-1945 western border. Given Hossbach's affinity for expellee interests, it made sense to limit the scope of Stiebeling's talks with Polish officials to just identifying and caring for war graves and to temper expectations. Hossbach hoped to balance a diplomatic approach with Polish officials

¹⁷⁴“ Zu der Rechtslage der Frage der deutschen Kriegsgräber in Polen,“ Referat Ost, Kassel 04.07.1960, BArch N 24/181.

¹⁷⁵ Brief von Büro der Ausländischen Gräberfürsorge Warschau and die Volksbund Geschäftsstelle, 11.08.1960, BArch N 24/173.

¹⁷⁶ “Aktenvermerk betr. Reise von Herrn Stiebeling nach Warschau, Bezug. Anweisungen von Herrn General Hoßbach am 11.08.1960,“ Referat Ost, Kassel, 12.08.1960, BArch N 24/181.

in the short term, while harboring expellee interests as a long-term goal. The topic of repatriating German remains was tabu for a few reasons. One of the major reasons the care of German war graves – and civilian graves – was a sensitive subject was that their presence was proof that much of post-war Polish territory was once German. Repatriating remains could have solved that issue for the communist regime, albeit at a considerable cost and effort considering the hundreds of thousands of scattered graves across Poland. It was more likely that Hossbach's statement reflected expellee interests. Removal of German remains would have only furthered the loss of the Eastern territories and represented another kind of expulsion.

Stiebeling met with officials from the Polish Red Cross and the Office for Care of War Graves in Warsaw in the fall of 1960, who received him cordially, but also refused any direct cooperation with the Volksbund.¹⁷⁷ Stiebeling did not indicate why they turned down cooperation, but there were many likely reasons. The Volksbund's Nazi past was no secret – that alone was reason enough to refuse association. Sharing information about German graves on Polish territory could be used to bolster German expellee demands to return. That same information could also support West German territorial revisionism. Being that the Volksbund was concerned primarily with war graves – the graves of soldiers who tried wipe Poland from the map little over a decade ago – memories of war crimes and genocide were still quite fresh.

With attempts at state affiliations in Poland stymied, the Volksbund returned to its pre-war network of Protestant contacts in Eastern Europe with hopes of renewing it.¹⁷⁸ The expulsions had severely decreased the number of German speaking communities across Eastern Europe, but a small number of Germans still remained in some scattered, rural

¹⁷⁷ "Aktenvermerk betr. Reise von Herrn Stiebeling nach Warschau, Bezug. Anweisungen von Herrn General Hoßbach am 11.08.1960," Referat Ost, Kassel, 12.08.1960, BArch N 24/181.

¹⁷⁸ "Brief von Konstantin von Beguelin Geschäftsstelle des Volksbundes an OKR J. Bartelt Kirchliches Außenamt der EKD, 30.06.1961," EZA 6/4392.

communities. Yet, establishing – or renewing – contact with these surviving Germans was not a viable option, especially in Poland. In 1961, an academic consultant of *Referat Ost* in West Berlin, a Lutheran theology professor named Harald Kruska who had been expelled from his home in Posen in 1945, advised that:

The Lutheran Church in Poland is in a very difficult situation. Lutheran has always meant German in Poland. This is particularly true at the present time and also applies to Protestant Christians of Polish nationality. Since the Polish state is in a dispute with the Church, but the Catholic Church in Poland is a considerable strength, the Lutheran Church in this conflict, since it has become an insignificant minority, atones for both denominations, is harassed, and oppressed, expropriated and, as far as possible, robbed of its own life.¹⁷⁹

Professor Kruska emphasized that the Volksbund needed to adjust “its German attitude and base its measures” on the actual situation of the Lutheran Church in Poland.¹⁸⁰ He also strongly advised against contacting pastors in Poland and in “our German eastern regions,” which would have been tantamount to endangering the welfare of these men.¹⁸¹

The Catholic church became the Volksbund’s next best option.¹⁸² Due to Poland’s borders shifting westwards after 1945, the Holocaust, and the expulsion of ethnic minorities (Germans and Ukrainians), post-war Poland became much more ethnically homogenous and overwhelmingly Catholic. 90% of Polish citizens identified as Catholic in 1946 as opposed to 60% in pre-war Poland.¹⁸³ The first Communist regime under Wladyslaw Gomulka sought early rapprochement with Polish Catholics to stabilize his regime in a country where Communists made a small majority. The years of significant state repression against the Catholic church were between 1949 and 1956. The communist regime in Warsaw successfully removed Catholic influence on public education, arrested many clerics critical of

¹⁷⁹ “Aktenvermerk Referat Ost, Kassel den 03.02.1961,” BArch N 24/181.

¹⁸⁰ “Aktenvermerk Referat Ost, Kassel den 03.02.1961,” BArch N 24/181.

¹⁸¹ “Aktenvermerk Referat Ost, Kassel den 03.02.1961,” BArch N 24/181.

¹⁸² “Aktenvermerk Referat Ost, Kassel den 03.02.1961,” BArch N 24/181.

¹⁸³ Mikołaj Stanisław Kunicki, *Between the Brown and the Red: Nationalism, Catholicism, and Communism in Twentieth-Century Poland: The Politics of Bolesław Piasecki* (Ohio University Press Polish and Polish-American Studies Series: Ohio University Press, 2012), 82.

communism including Poland's highest primate Stefan Wyszyński, and nationalized a large portion of its property.¹⁸⁴ However, by 1956, Polish communists had to recognize that the Catholic church still had strong resonance with the majority of Poles. The Polish Communist party's toleration of Catholicism became a key feature of national communism, or its political rapprochement between Polish nationalists and communists. As a result, the Catholic church retained a considerable influence on Polish society so long it did not openly challenge the political dominance of the Polish Communist party or Marxist ideology.¹⁸⁵

Referat Ost first reached out to the Vatican before daring direct contact with Polish Catholics.¹⁸⁶ The Volksbund had continued close relations with the Italian government and a presence in Rome since the interwar era, and naturally the Catholic church in Germany, so reaching the Vatican was not particularly difficult. Pope Paul VI received the project of the Volksbund well. He later he included the concern for the war graves at the behest of the Volksbund and the International Red Cross in his appeal for peace to the peoples of the world on August 26, 1965, with the following words:

We would like to spread the cloak of peace over the war graves as well, so that those who died will also be buried in them, who are still waiting on this last sign of human love, waiting for the relatives left behind to be able to visit them and honor their graves. The deathly sleep of so many victims of this and future generations is a warning and reminder of the terrible events that must never be repeated.¹⁸⁷

The Volksbund's relationship with the Vatican boosted its influence across Europe, especially in Italy and France, but cooperation with Poland still eluded them even with the help of the Vatican.

¹⁸⁴ Hanna Diskin, "The Stalinist Era." In *The Seeds of Triumph: Church and State in Gomulka's Poland*, (Central European University Press, 2001), 69–106; See also, Robert E. Alvis, "From Stalinism to Solidarity (1945–1989)," In *White Eagle, Black Madonna: One Thousand Years of the Polish Catholic Tradition* (Fordham University Press, 2016), 223-5.

¹⁸⁵ See: Mikołaj Stanisław Kunicki, "Under the Cross and the Red Flag, 1945–56." In *Between the Brown and the Red: Nationalism, Catholicism, and Communism in Twentieth Century Poland—The Politics of Bolesław Piasecki*, 1st ed. (Ohio University Press, 2012), 77–110.

¹⁸⁶ "Aktenvermerk Referat Ost, Kassel den 03.02.1961," BArch N 24/181.

¹⁸⁷ "Brief von Präsident des Volksbundes Walter Trepte an den Rat der EKD, 15.06.1965," EZA 6/4392.

In fact, it was the Vatican's close connection to West Germany and its anti-Communist principles that created a schism with Polish Catholic leaders at this time. In 1948, Pope Pius XII condemned the support given by Polish Catholics in expelling Germans from Western Poland, castigated Poles for not forgiving the Germans of past crimes, and firmly aligned the Vatican with the West. Polish Catholic bishops defended the expulsions as "acts of historical justice."¹⁸⁸ Pope Paul VI echoed similar sentiments again in 1962.¹⁸⁹ The Vatican's pro-western stances put Polish Catholics in an awkward situation in its relationship with the Communist regime. Not until the end of the Second Vatican council in 1965, where Polish bishops made it clear such rhetoric was not going to help church's position in Communist Poland, did the Vatican take a much more conciliatory and neutral tone in the Cold War struggle.

Following the Second Vatican Council, a small group of Polish Catholic bishops believed European Catholics to be in a conciliatory mood as well. They published a memorial text commemorating 1000 years of Polish Catholicism in which they extended an invitation to German and West European Catholics celebrate with them. The principal author was bishop Boleslaw Kominek, who advocated for German-Polish reconciliation on cultural and Christian grounds, but on the condition of West German recognition of the Oder-Neisse line. Warsaw denounced the publication as did most Polish Catholics, and, to Kominek's surprise, many German Catholics as well. The German Catholics in expellee community in particular denounced him as a "Polish national chauvinist" based on his support for expulsion in

¹⁸⁸ Mikołaj Stanisław Kunicki, "Under the Cross and the Red Flag, 1945–56." In *Between the Brown and the Red: Nationalism, Catholicism, and Communism in Twentieth-Century Poland—The Politics of Bolesław Piasecki*, 1st ed. (Ohio University Press, 2012), 95; See also, Peter C. Kent, *The Lonely Cold War of Pope Pius XII: The Roman Catholic Church and the Division of Europe, 1943-1950* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

¹⁸⁹ Andrzej Grajewski, "Dialog über Mauern hinweg: Der Brief der polnischen Bischöfe im Kontext der Ostpolitik des Vatikans," in Boll, Friedhelm u.a. (Hrsg.), *Versöhnung und Politik. Polnisch-deutsche Versöhnungsiniciativen und die Entspannungspolitik*, (Bonn 2009), 120.

1945.¹⁹⁰ It seemed there was little even the Catholic church could do to assist the Volksbund, as they were quite divided themselves.

The resistance on the part of the Polish Catholic church had less to do with Communist state influence and more with the perception of the Volksbund's – and broadly West German – insincerity towards meaningful Polish-German reconciliation. Any argument from West German organizations or the government in Bonn that the expulsion of Germans from Poland was “immoral,” “violated human rights, or “against Christian values” did not appeal to Polish Catholics – or really any Poles.¹⁹¹ At no time did the Polish Catholic church raise any noticeable objection to the human rights violations committed during the expulsion. On the contrary, most clergy assisted in the expulsion.¹⁹² From the church's perception, Polonization and Catholicization of former German territories was fully justified. Within the context of recent German attempts to erase Polish national life, and the long history of ethnic and religious tensions with the predominantly Protestant Germans that once lived in these territories, the removal of the German minority seemed a fully justified and patriotic duty. In addition, due to the Soviet Union's annexation of Poland's Eastern territories, Poles saw the Polonization of former German lands also as a humanitarian solution to house its own refugees. Clerics, such as Kominek argued, expulsion was a humane alternative to retribution killings – even though violence proceeded nonetheless.¹⁹³ The Polish Catholic view on German expulsion was perhaps the only area where it found common ground with the Polish communist regime in Warsaw.¹⁹⁴ By 1965, the Volksbund paused its attempts to build a war graves project Poland and moved on to more promising areas for development.

¹⁹⁰ Robert Zurek, “Boleslaw Kominek – Autor der Versöhnungsbotschaft der polnischen Bischöfe,” In *Between the Brown and the Red: Nationalism, Catholicism, and Communism in Twentieth-Century Poland—The Politics of Bolesław Piasecki*, 1st ed. (Ohio University Press, 2012), 58.

¹⁹¹ Strobel, “Die Kirche Polens,” 121.

¹⁹² Strobel, “Die Kirche Polens,” 121; See also, Diskin, *The Seeds of Triumph*, 30-1.

¹⁹³ Strobel, “Die Kirche Polens,” 121.

¹⁹⁴ Strobel, “Die Kirche Polens,” 124.

“For German Aggressors, There Are No Graves:” German War Graves in the USSR

The Volksbund’s first attempt to access the millions of German war graves in the Soviet Union began when the foreign office learned of the agreement between the East Germany and Soviet Union regarding German and Soviet war graves in December 1956. The agreement was little more than a bilateral exchange of POW grave lists, and the Soviets never followed through on their end.¹⁹⁵ Yet, some in the Volksbund and the West German Foreign Office misinterpreted the move and feared that this meant the estimated 1.2 million war graves of the Second World War and approximate 1.1 million POW graves would forever be out of reach.¹⁹⁶ Foreign Office Legation Counsel Raimund Hergt believed that if the West German embassy in Moscow attempted to intervene, Moscow would cite this agreement with East Germany, which assumed responsibility for the care and identification of war dead in Eastern Europe. Hergt feared that the Soviet government would use this tactic throughout Eastern Europe and effectively paralyze the care of German war dead.¹⁹⁷

Also in 1956, West Germany began its first negotiations with the Soviet Union for a trade and consular agreement. West Germany’s Hallstein doctrine precluded diplomatic relations with any state that recognized East Germany to promote its claim as the sole, legitimate German nation state. The exception was the Soviet Union, which was one of the victorious allies in 1945 and a global superpower. The leader of the discussions for the Foreign Office was Rolf Lahr, a former Eastern front soldier who joined the SA in 1933 and entered the diplomatic service after the Second World War. Lahr explained to Volksbund

¹⁹⁵ “Bericht über die Verhandlungen mit der Delegation des Ministeriums für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der UdSSR,“ pg 10, BArch SAPMO DY 30/3380.

¹⁹⁶ These numbers reflect the estimates at the time for the amount of combat deaths and POW deaths on Soviet territory. The numbers fluctuate between 1.7 and 3 Million over the decades of the Cold War and are still subject to debate. For the purpose of this study, I settle on 1 million combat deaths, 1.2 million POW deaths, for 2.2 million total German war graves in the Soviet Union based on the most consistent numbers from the archival number and what other scholars have cited. See: Naumann, Klaus. *Nachkrieg in Deutschland*. Hamburg: Hamburger Verlag, 2001; Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace*, (New York: Harper, 2009).

¹⁹⁷ “Bericht über Besprechungen im Auswärtigen Amt in Bonn 8. Und 12. Januar 1957,“ BArch N 24/175.

executive board members Christel Eulen and Otto Margraf that bringing in the question of war graves was impossible.¹⁹⁸ He agreed with Legation Counsel Hergt's assessment that the Soviets would use their agreement with East Germany to avoid the question of war graves.

The Volksbund sought out individuals like Rolf Lahr as partners in the Foreign Office rather than other ranking members of Adenauer's cabinet.¹⁹⁹ Margraf wrote about Lahr to the other executive board members: "as an old soldier and participant of the war in Russia... it is very gratifying that in Ambassador Lahr we have found a man who has a particularly great interest and understanding for our concerns, which is a matter close to his heart."²⁰⁰

Trust based on front experience during the war seemed to be a deciding factor in the Volksbund's choice in partners. Through such relationships, the Volksbund gained access to both sensitive information and powerful offices within the West German Government. In a separate letter to the executive board, president Ahlhorn explained that Lahr had instructed

¹⁹⁸ Letter from Legations Council Raimund Hergt to Volksbund President Wilhelm Ahlhorn 13.07.1957, BArch N 24/156.

¹⁹⁹ Lahr expressed to Otto Margraf his dissatisfaction with Foreign Minister Heinrich von Brentano's lack of interest in the care of German war graves and offered to keep bringing the issue up in Bonn during the coming weeks. Lahr claimed that the source of his dissatisfaction with Brentano was the letter exchange between the Foreign Minister and Volksbund President Ahlhorn. Interestingly, Brentano made the same assurances and promises in his exchanges with Ahlhorn as Lahr and Hergt had. Brentano and the Volksbund leadership were politically in step, and Brentano did not present an obvious lack of enthusiasm for the question of German war graves in the Soviet Union. Brentano was an ardent conservative. He opposed any diplomatic recognition or talks with East Germany, supported Adenauer's aim to integrate Germany into the West, and German rearmament. Many in Adenauer's cabinet and among the opposition parties did not think highly of Brentano. They perceived him as shy, bookish, too much of a sycophant, and lacking the backbone to reestablish German prowess in the international arena. In addition, there were persistent rumors that Heinrich von Brentano was homosexual – chancellor Adenauer allegedly said in his characteristic Kölsch dialect "dat ist mir eja, solange er mich nit anpackt" (That does not matter to me, so long he does not grope me), a persistent rumor in the CDU with little supporting evidence. Brentano's presence in the cabinet was tolerated because Adenauer valued him, but this clearly did not dispel any lingering homophobia or general disdain for him. Legation Council Lahr and Brentano likely agreed politically on most issues. Yet, as a former combat veteran, Lahr questioned Brentano's commitment to protecting German war graves in the Soviet Union more because his perceived lack of masculinity than because he lacked political will. See: "Abschrift" – Letter from Foreign Minister von Brentano to Volksbund President Wilhelm Ahlhorn 12.06.1957, BArch N 24/156; Winkler, *The Long Road West*, 191; Daniel Kosthorst, *Brentano und die deutsche Einheit: Deutschland und Ostpolitik des Aussenministers im Kabinett Adenauer 1955-61*, Düsseldorf, 1993; Daniel Kosthorst, *Brentano und die deutsche Einheit: Deutschland und Ostpolitik des Aussenministers im Kabinett Adenauer 1955-61*, Düsseldorf, 1993.

²⁰⁰ "Abschrift – Bericht über eine Besprechung in Bonn am 03.07.1957 mit Botschafter Lahr," BArch N 24/156.

him and the rest of the board to treat any correspondence with and materials from the Foreign Office as top secret. The fact that a private organization had direct access to high level diplomatic and sensitive discussions further demonstrates the influence they had within the federal government in Bonn, blurring the Volksbund's role as a private organization.²⁰¹

The Foreign Office's first step to advance the Volksbund's interests was to try to get its Soviet counterparts to at least open a dialogue on the topic. This goal alone proved difficult. Most Soviet officials either ignored the topic or insisted that no German war graves existed on Soviet territory, or sometimes some would even say more specifically, "for the German aggressors, there are no graves in the Soviet Union."²⁰² The first statement was a vague denial intended to frustrate the West Germans. The second statement was both an accusation of guilt and punishment – that fallen Wehrmacht soldiers did not deserve a physical presence on Soviet territory. Characteristic of Soviet smoke and mirror tactics within its diplomatic corps, this statement consists of both truths and lies. The tactic made it difficult for both the Volksbund and Foreign Office to distinguish the two without the ability to travel to sites in the Soviet Union. Just starting a dialogue was difficult if the facts could not be established and the interlocutor was not forthcoming with information. The actual state of the over two million German war graves in the Soviet Union remained largely unknown to the Volksbund and West German officials but reports from both returning POWs and veterans of the Eastern front helped illustrate what to expect.

For example, at the battle of Leningrad, the front stalled in attritional warfare from autumn 1941 to spring 1944. This tactical situation meant that all German graves there were looked after by the troops. However, the style of trench warfare near Leningrad was not

²⁰¹ Letter from Volksbund President Wilhelm Ahlhorn to all members of the executive board, 16.07.1957, BArch N 24/156.

²⁰² "Die Versorgung der deutschen Soldatengräber in der Sowjetunion durch die Deutsche Wehrmacht," compiled for the Volksbund by Wilhelm Heinrich *Referat Ost* 1982, pg 10, Volksbund Archive A 100-1053.

always conducive to constant care and record keeping. Unlike the trench warfare of the First World War, there were no rigid lines or continuous trenches. The main battle line consisted mainly of strongholds with circular defensive positions. The Wehrmacht secured large spaces in between only temporarily during armed maneuvers and Red Army soldiers often slipped through. A Volksbund report that compiled the accounts of returning soldiers and POWs between 1946 and 1955 explained the consequence this tactic had on German war graves:

[The Soviets] soon recognized the interface between divisions and corps and launched massive attacks here, which led to breakthroughs and caused confusion among the staff and rear services. The brisk partisan activity also caused losses in the rear of the front. This resulted in a wide distribution of graves and cemeteries. Wherever possible, military cemeteries were laid out for the dead of a battalion, regiment, or division. Cemeteries were also created at the main dressing stations, medical companies, and field hospitals. Constant work had to be done to preserve and secure the graves. There were 1,100 different burial sites in the Leningrad area, where over 80,000 fallen soldiers were buried. Each unit tried to keep the graves of their fallen comrades in good order.²⁰³

The defeat at Stalingrad in March 1943 and other reversals on the Eastern Front, such as the collapse of the Demyansk Pocket South of Leningrad, destabilized the German positions around the city.²⁰⁴ More and more cemeteries were abandoned until the final retreat in Spring 1944.

As they retreated, Wehrmacht soldiers were ordered to remove all grave markers and level the burial mounds before withdrawing. If the retreat was too hasty to complete the order, the advancing Red Army often finished the job for them out of revenge. The order was

²⁰³ The Volksbund conducted their own interviews with POWs returning from the Soviet Union, which their own internal reports periodically reference; "Die Versorgung der deutschen Soldatengräber in der Sowjetunion durch die deutsche Wehrmacht," compiled for the Volksbund by Wilhelm Heinrich *Referat Ost* 1982, Volksbund Archive A 100-1053.

²⁰⁴ As a part of the effort of the Wehrmacht to take Moscow and add another line of communication between the army groups, the 16th army occupied the region of Demyansk south of Leningrad, creating a salient in the German lines in January 1942. Seeing an opportunity, the Soviet Northwestern Front counterattacked and encircled 100,000 German soldiers. In April, the 16th army broke through the encirclement, relying on arms and supplies airlifted to them, and kept Demyansk under German control. The defeat at Stalingrad led to the position's abandonment the following year, weakening the Leningrad front further. "Die Versorgung der deutschen Soldatengräber in der Sowjetunion durch die deutsche Wehrmacht," compiled for the Volksbund by Wilhelm Heinrich *Referat Ost* 1982, Volksbund Archive A 100-1053.

made in order to prevent the enemy from “devastating and plundering the graves,” but the Soviets were often willing to erase the presence of these graves from Soviet territory whether they plundered them or not.²⁰⁵ In 1963, former general of the Wehrmacht and convicted war criminal Hubert Lanz wrote the Volksbund describing this phenomenon.²⁰⁶

At that time, we buried them on the battlefields in the manner of comrades and decorated and cared for their graves as far as the situation permitted. But we also know that the Soviets not only let these graves fall into disrepair but obliterated them by leveling them. We gave ourselves up to the vague hope that in time it might be possible to gradually overcome the hatred that had accumulated in the East and to awaken the most primitive human feeling towards the dead.²⁰⁷

Much like his peer and member of the Volksbund executive board General Friedrich Hossbach, this statement reveals a condescending attitude towards the peoples of Eastern Europe. Lanz focused on the peoples of the Soviet Union in his statement, but it was a common attitude among many in the Volksbund that they, the cultured Germans, had to remind the psychologically disturbed and culturally backward Slavic peoples how to remember war dead. At the same time, the refusal by the Eastern bloc states to grant access to the German war graves or ensure their protection did little to counter this line of thinking.

If the reliance on the testimony of a convicted war criminal was not already questionable, the Volksbund’s assessment of the Red Army’s treatment of German war dead during the collapse of the Eastern Front proved unreliable for other reasons. Due to its

²⁰⁵ “Die Versorgung der deutschen Soldatengräber in der Sowjetunion durch die deutsche Wehrmacht,” compiled for the Volksbund by Wilhelm Heinrich *Referat Ost* 1982, Volksbund Archive A 100-1053.

²⁰⁶ Lanz was convicted at Nuremberg in 1947 for several war crimes including the massacre of 5000 captured Italian soldiers in Cephalonia, and various atrocities against civilians in Albania, Greece, and Yugoslavia under the pretense of anti-partisan actions. He received the light sentence of only 12 years imprisonment, due to the mishandling of the prosecution’s case against him and was released early in 1951. He claimed to have opposed Hitler, and even planned an officer’s plot in 1943 to arrest Hitler during a planned visit to Ukraine. Hitler cancelled the trip at the last minute and the coup never took place. Some scholars suggest this is a dubious post-war claim of Lanz to paint himself as being anti-Hitler before 1945 and distance himself from the atrocities he committed. Some of Lanz’s former officers tried to corroborate this claimed coup attempt, but there is no hard proof that they seriously attempted to depose Hitler through Lanz’s armed forces. See: Hannes Heer, Klaus Naumann, and Roy Shelton, *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941–1944*. Berghahn Books, 2000), 493-7.

²⁰⁷ Letter to Volksbund executive board member Dr. Heinz von Hausen from General Hubert Lanz, 30.10.1963, Volksbund Archive A. 100-1053.

reliance on the testimonies from Wehrmacht soldiers or POWs who were not firsthand witnesses, the assumption that the Soviets plundered then erased all German war dead became taken as fact. Returning Wehrmacht soldiers and POWs relied on hearsay or their own cultural and racial biases against the Slavic peoples to “inform” the Volksbund. Soviet sources reveal that as the Red Army reconquered its territory and pushed into Eastern Europe between 1943 and 1945, it faced the gargantuan task of locating, identifying, and reburying its dead from the German invasion in June 1941. The Wehrmacht, Waffen-SS, and the infamous *Einsatzgruppen* massacred Soviet citizens and POWs, perceiving them as racial inferiors. The perpetrators left their victims’ remains in scattered unmarked mass graves – often buried, but sometimes left to rot in the open air. Exact numbers will likely never be known, but some 8.7 million Soviet soldiers and some 14.3 million Soviet citizens were killed between 1941 and 1945.²⁰⁸ In one infamous case, the Wehrmacht dumped 3000 Red army corpses into a mine shaft near the city of Shakhty rather than take the time to dig a new hole.²⁰⁹ On top of this, fresh German and Soviet dead intermingled during the Soviet counterattack 1943-45. The well-maintained German cemeteries of the Nazi occupation, if they had not been flattened by the retreating Wehrmacht, were destroyed by the Red Army out of revenge following the discovery of unmarked mass graves of their own murdered citizens. German dead, following the Soviet counterattack, were systematically reburied in the same manner as fallen Soviet soldiers – they were moved to a separate cemetery, placed in a large open, square whole, lined up in rows, and buried with a single marker indicating the mass grave’s presence.²¹⁰ Red Army record keepers were not adept at preserving identities, whether German or Soviet, mostly due to the swiftness with which the Red Army moved in

²⁰⁸ See: Michael Haynes, "Counting Soviet Deaths in the Great Patriotic War," *Europe-Asia Studies*. 55 (2): 2000, 303–309.

²⁰⁹ Robert Dale, “Remobilizing the Dead: Wartime and Postwar Soviet Burial Practices and the Construction of the Memory of the Great Patriotic War,” *Kritika* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 56.

²¹⁰ Dale, “Remobilizing the Dead,” 55.

its counterattack and the little effort given after the physical task of reburial was completed.²¹¹

Perhaps the largest concentration of German war graves on Soviet territory was around Stalingrad. Reports from returning POWs from the battle of Stalingrad in the mid-1950s revealed that around 143,000 German war dead were buried around the former battleground. They themselves had completed the work as prisoners of the Red Army. The German POWs had buried their dead in numerous mass graves around Stalingrad in the years between 1943 and 1945.²¹² These graves were not intentionally erased, but given crude and basic markers that faded, were neglected, and forgotten over time. The large number of German war graves on Soviet territory was not only a result of multiple years of sustained, annihilationist combat. The brutal conditions of the Gulag system also contributed to the high number of German war graves on Soviet territory. In 1982, the Scientific Commission for German Prisoner History estimated the number of German prisoners of war who died in Soviet custody to be at 1,110,000, but the exact number is still unknown and might have been much higher.²¹³

The existence of millions of German war graves on Soviet territory motivated the Volksbund in its decades long efforts to access them. Similar to France after both world wars, the Volksbund sought to create spaces of national commemoration within the territory of a former adversary. The Volksbund considered it a great achievement in reconciliation between the German people and former national adversaries to travel and mourn abroad. Additionally, it is a small consolation in defeat to mourn the defeated on the territory of the victorious. Where this situation differed from France significantly was that the Soviet Union was the

²¹¹ Dale, "Remobilizing the Dead," 53.

²¹² "Die Versorgung der deutschen Soldatengräber in der Sowjetunion durch die deutsche Wehrmacht," compiled for the Volksbund by Wilhelm Heinrich Refarat Ost 1982, Volksbund Archive A 100-1053.

²¹³ "Die Versorgung der deutschen Soldatengräber in der Sowjetunion durch die deutsche Wehrmacht," compiled for the Volksbund by Wilhelm Heinrich Refarat Ost 1982, Volksbund Archive A 100-1053.

ideological enemy of both the Nazis and the post-war Western bloc. Cold War tensions rendered the Volksbund's prospects to work in the East difficult, if not outright impossible. Still, to create spaces of national mourning and bring western commemoration practices to the Soviet Union would have been the crowning achievement of the Volksbund in the post-war era, and one it sought out persistently. The condescending views of some its members towards the peoples of Eastern Europe, such as those of Friedrich Hossbach, played a role here, as did the perception that Socialists were "Godless," therefore without common cultural morals (*Sitten*), and did not honor the dead individually, but collectively and anonymously in mass graves. The fact that some German war cemeteries adopted this model, or that German forces during their occupation of Europe buried their victims in anonymous mass graves, never seemed to influence Friedrich Hossbach or other Volksbund members. Combined with the Soviets refusal to acknowledge this existence of German war graves, this struggle for the commemoration of German war graves started less as a project to build a more unified Europe through a multi- or bi-national commemoration of war graves on equitable levels of respect, and more as another means to wage the Cold War.

Since the end of the war, the Soviets had been adamant about building grandiose monuments in East Berlin and Seelow Heights north of Frankfurt on the Oder, the sites of their final battlefield victories over the Nazis and the final, ideological victory of Soviet Socialism over Fascism. West Germany also held the graves of thousands of Soviet POWs, forced laborers, and concentration camps inmates. In reality, after the final defeat of the Nazis on May 8, 1945, Joseph Stalin pursued a commemorative narrative that boosted his own personality cult and placed the commemoration of Red Army soldiers and civilians murdered by German armed forces in a secondary role. Grand monuments of Stalin and the Red Army adorned city squares, boulevards, and parks. Where the Soviet war dead was actually buried – let alone German war dead – there was little more than a cleared green

space with a modest obelisk or similar stone marker. Monument complexes such as Treptower Park played a larger geopolitical role than preserving war dead and was therefore exceptional for the burial and commemoration of Soviet war dead.

The task of reburying Soviet war dead itself was monumental and did not lack interest from Soviet officials and citizens who wanted to provide proper burial and memorialization in the first post war years. Yet, there was routinely too little money and building material to spare. In addition, these burial sites were often located in the vast Soviet countryside, which was hard to access, and the danger of unexploded shells and mines persisted well into the late 1950s.²¹⁴ Against this lack of proper burial back home, unknown outside the Soviet Union, the Soviet diplomatic corps repeatedly insisted that the West Germans care, maintain, and provide information on Soviet POW graves in West Germany. Although outside Moscow's orbit of influence, the Soviets still expected West Germany to care for their war dead as did the other states of the Eastern Bloc – as a means to project symbolic cultural power and shift the financing of these sites off of their own overstretched coffers. The Volksbund provided graves for the Soviet POWs buried on West German territory, funded by the government in Bonn, but mostly out of a desire for Soviet reciprocity.

Starting shortly after the Soviet Union's recognition of West Germany in 1957, the Soviet Embassy in Rolandseck just south of Bonn requested information on the condition of and visitation to the Soviet graves in West Germany. The Volksbund willingly supported the Embassy's efforts to get an overview of the burial sites, and thereafter remained in contact with the Soviet Embassy. Sometimes the Volksbund even functioned as another avenue of communication with the responsible offices of the federal government in Bonn, again blurring its status as a private organization. The Soviet Embassy took part at the inauguration of Soviet military cemeteries in Herleshausen (Hessen), Ruberg (North Rhine-Westphalia),

²¹⁴ Dale, "Remobilizing the Dead," 62-3.

Stukenbrock (North Rhine-Westphalia), and Alften (Lower Saxony). The Volksbund repeatedly used these opportunities to draw the attention of the Soviet representatives to the unresolved problem of the German war graves in the Soviet Union. In fact, it was at such an event that the Volksbund was able to first approach Soviet officials on the issue of German war graves. In one account of such an interaction at the opening of the cemetery in Herleshausen in 1959, Volksbund General Secretary Otto Margraf took the opportunity to explain his organization's work and interest in working in the Soviet Union to the head of the consulate in Bonn, Deputy Secretary Chotulev.²¹⁵ Chotulev expressed interest in the Volksbund's work, particularly in its process of identifying missing persons which had long since stalled in the Soviet Union, but Otto Margraf remarked in his report that he remained skeptical that this would lead to any breakthroughs.²¹⁶ Volksbund President Walter Trepte saw another opportunity in June 1965 when he received an invitation to the Soviet embassy. A consular named Mr. Konoplyankin inquired about the status of Soviet POW reburials in West Germany. During the meeting, Trepte agreed to share documents but only in exchange for Soviet documents on German war casualties in the Soviet Union. A letter between Volksbund officials the following year described the exchange as "polite but reserved" with the consular demonstrating little interest in the offer, likely because Consular Konoplyankin did not expect to give quid pro quo for a simple grave inquiry.²¹⁷ Just as it had in Poland, the Volksbund paused its attempts to reach the war graves of the Soviet Union by 1965 and waited until more favorable opportunities presented themselves.

²¹⁵ "Vermerk über Fühlungnahme mit Vertretern der sowjetischen Botschaft in Bonn aus Anlass der Einweihung des russischen Soldatenfriedhofes in Herleshausen am 26.9.1959," Otto Margraf, Volksbund Archive A 100-1053.

²¹⁶ "Vermerk über Fühlungnahme mit Vertretern der sowjetischen Botschaft in Bonn aus Anlass der Einweihung des russischen Soldatenfriedhofes in Herleshausen am 26.9.1959," Otto Margraf, Volksbund Archive A 100-1053.

²¹⁷ Letter to Rudolf Optiz from Volksbund executive Hammerson, 27.07.1966, Volksbund Archive A 100-1053.

Conclusion – German War Graves in Cold War Europe

Much like post-war divided Germany, the status of its war graves became an unanswered question without an official post-war settlement. The Volksbund attempted to solve the war graves question by negotiating with each state separately, but within the context of the Cold War. Despite the strategic alliance between West Germany and Western Europe, there was no less hostility and reservation against the commemoration of fallen Wehrmacht soldiers in Western Europe as there was in Eastern Europe. The war graves agreements between West Germany and its Western European allies – negotiated by the Volksbund – were successful partially due to the first efforts of European integration, championed by Konrad Adenauer, but also the Volksbund's conservative approach to reconciliation. The largely conservative governments of Western Europe had their own post-war questions of legitimacy from their war-weary citizens to face. "Reconciliation over the Graves" promoted the creation of nationalist narratives to unify Western Europe around positive narratives of resistance, victory, and graciousness in defeat. The very texts of these war grave agreements ignored the realities of war time atrocity, genocide, racism, Antisemitism, and collaboration that enabled Nazi crimes across Europe.

In Eastern Europe, West German diplomatic isolation left the Volksbund a free hand to pursue access to German war graves. Yet, the lack of a post war agreement of a final post-war agreement with Poland and the Soviet Union placed severe limitations on the Volksbund. Influence from the Volksbund's expellee members and the continuity of National Socialist views within its *Referat Ost* precluded any genuine attempts at reconciliation. The Volksbund's strategy to accessing the war graves of Eastern Europe was influenced by the long-term hope of reversing the terms of German defeat in the East: ie. the expulsion of ethnic Germans from the East and Germany's territorial losses to Poland and the Soviet Union. Without a larger project of integration equivalent of *Westbindung*, the EEC, or even

“Reconciliation over the Graves” to recontextualize the Volksbund’s goals in Eastern Europe, the Volksbund failed to even appeal to nationalist conservative elements of Eastern Europe, such as the Polish Catholic church. This particular failure demonstrated that more than just the narrow ideological struggle between the Capitalist West and the Communist East was at play. The Volksbund operated on assumptions about the peoples of Eastern Europe based on cultural backwardness and blind vengeance without honestly engaging with the context of the Nazi war of annihilation. The German war graves question became not only another means to wage an ideological struggle against Communism, but to push nationalist, German claims, and narratives on the states of Eastern Europe during the height of the Cold War.

Chapter 3: Commemorating War Graves in Divided Germany

1953-65

Between 1953 and 1965, the SED pursued a series of aggressive anti-church campaigns with which the Volksbund's project in the East had to contend. As the SED solidified its rule and forced its pervasive influence into nearly all aspects of East German life, the Berlin Bureau and its Protestant supporters had to navigate a dangerous game of cooperating with the state and while undermining its authority. This study argues that the Berlin Bureau, the Protestant church, and the *Vertrauenspfarrer* received widespread support from many East Germans, seeking information on still missing loved ones and wanting to commemorate German war dead – even if only quietly, privately, and far removed from their gravesites. Paradoxically, the SED's decision after 1961 to seek rapprochement with the Protestant church – which included tolerating the activities of the Berlin Bureau – proved more detrimental to the long-term viability of the Volksbund's project. By 1965, a new post-war generation raised and socialized under state socialism had less commitment to commemorating German war graves than the war-time generation.

In West Germany, the growing emphasis on the remembrance and political advocacy for survivors of Nazi persecution, particularly after the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials of the early 1960s, forced the Volksbund and the conservative government in Bonn, to expand the legal definition of war graves. These reform efforts to expand the protections under the war graves law beyond fallen soldiers conflicted with the Volksbund's own narrow definition of war graves and culminated in the 1965 War Graves law. However, many of the organizations pushing for reform of the war graves law defined the category of "victims of the Nazis" broadly and universal. The text of this law expanded protections to German civilian dead, forced laborers, POWs, and concentration camp dead on German territory broadly (there was no mention East and West Germany in the text). This struggle coincided with growing emphasis on Holocaust memory, especially after the publicized Eichmann and Auschwitz

trials of 1961 and between 1963 and 1965, but the mention of particular victim groups, such as the Jews were still rare.

The central thesis of this section is that this universalizing discourse around the 1965 War Graves law informed the evolution of *Volkstrauertag*, where both West German state and Volksbund had much more control with little influence from reformers and survivor advocates. State commemoration of the Second World War on *Volkstrauertag* reached more of a compromise by 1965. The Volksbund and the West German government co-developed the rituals of *Volkstrauertag* to emphasize a universalization of victimhood that extended fallen German soldiers the same status de facto. The central ceremony in Bonn blurred the distinction between victims of Nazi persecution and war-time German losses. Fallen Wehrmacht soldiers, German civilians, Holocaust victims, and other victims of persecution now occupied the same position as “victims of war and tyranny” at *Volkstrauertag*. By 1965, *Volkstrauertag* organizers began adding the commemoration of “victims of totalitarianism” to the ceremony to satisfy staunch anti-Communists who equated East Germany with the Nazi regime.

The First Challenges Under State Socialism

The topic of war graves was one that rarely made its way to the Central Committee of the SED. One of the rare moments when it did was on December 5, 1957. When a protocol negotiated between East German and Soviet officials came up for approval. Between November 25th and 28th Soviet ambassadors led by Valerian Zorin, at this time the ambassador to West Germany, met with an East German delegation to discuss a bilateral exchange of grave lists among other diplomatic issues. Zorin promised to share Soviet information on known German war graves existing within the Soviet Union, but even the East German officials noted in the transcript that Soviet officials have promised this in the

past and had yet to do so.²¹⁸ The Soviets also insisted that under no circumstances could relatives visit the grave sites because “Soviet officials will only see it as attempts by the enemy to use such visits for espionage.”²¹⁹ A final point made by the East Germans, and emphasized during the central committee’s brief session, was that “our request to our Soviet friends not to do anything with West Germany on this question without first consulting with us was agreed to.”²²⁰ Given that the East Germans made no indication that they would take on an active role in the care, funding, investigation, or transfer of remains from the Soviet Union, this statement suggests that East Germany was prepared to pass this responsibility on to West Germany alone.

One main reason behind the SED’s approach, from the official East German perspective, was that these were “fascist” war dead and if any state was to be responsible for their care, if they were ever to be cared for, that should come from the “aggressive fascist regime” in Bonn. The government of the GDR had no interest to be associated with German war dead. After East Germany joined the Geneva convention in 1956, they made a conscious effort to transfer remains upon request or provide proper burial for fallen allied soldiers and any foreign nations, especially if they perished on their territory as forced laborers, captured dissidents or partisans, or victims of the concentration camps. East Germany noticeably never followed up with any Western government, and almost never with Warsaw Pact nations, on the status of German war dead in their territories. Another reason is that the SED would have had to admit that hundreds of thousands of Germans perished in Soviet POW camps.

Secondary considerations could have been the high cost of building and maintaining up to 1.2 million graves for Wehrmacht soldiers who fell in combat and an additional 1 million who

²¹⁸ “Bericht über die Verhandlungen mit der Delegation des Ministeriums für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der UdSSR,” pg 10, BArch SAPMO DY 30/3380.

²¹⁹ “Bericht über die Verhandlungen mit der Delegation des Ministeriums für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der UdSSR,” pg 10, BArch SAPMO DY 30/3380.

²²⁰ “Bericht über die Verhandlungen mit der Delegation des Ministeriums für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der UdSSR,” pg 10, BArch SAPMO DY 30/3380.

died in Soviet captivity. The SED was not willing to add these high expenditures to its perennially stressed budget for the reasons just stated, since it still had to fund the country's own reconstruction and economic reorganization while at the same time contributing to the reconstruction efforts of the Soviet Union.

Despite the SED's willingness to let German war graves slip into oblivion in East Germany, the Volksbund's West Berlin Bureau continued its work to save German war graves in East Germany and reach out to relatives. Its report from April 1953 on the previous six months of activity described a "feeling of thanks" among its personnel because despite "endless difficulties and various hinderances" the daily letters received from families thanking them for their efforts "encouraged us in our efforts in the interests of the relatives of the dead."²²¹ The regional churches collected 19,995.45 DM from its parishioners for the care of war graves in a six-month period, reflecting the Berlin Bureau's feeling of being supported by the people.²²² These displays of gratitude also demonstrated how the church still continued to represent a center for civil society in many localities now under the control of a State Socialist dictatorship. For four days in July 1954, the *Leipziger Kirchentag* had at least 60,000 participants each day – mostly from West Germany – and 650,000 people took part in its final event, which demonstrated to the SED that the protestant church still had mass support.²²³ One of the *Vertrauenspfarrer* for the Oder region, Pastor Furchtbar, explained that the people of several towns along the Oder were thankful for the "honoring of the war dead" especially since "pretentious memorial sites for Soviet soldiers have been erected everywhere here."²²⁴

²²¹ "Vertraulicher Bericht 1952/53," EZA 4/1133, pg 1.

²²² "Vertraulicher Bericht 1952/53," EZA 4/1133, pg 9.

²²³ Rudolf Mau, *Der Protestantismus im Osten Deutschlands (1945-1990)*. Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen IV/3, (Leipzig, 2005), 52.

²²⁴ "Vertraulicher Bericht 1952/53," EZA 4/1133, pg 9.

This optimism contrasted with the tone of the report issued by the Berlin Bureau in January 1954. Gertrude Heidborn began the report by stating that “even though their bureau was not directly attacked, the aggressive fight against the church has incurred troubles for our assistants.” The uprising of June 17, 1953, which started as a general strike due to continued poor living standards and increased political repressions, interrupted its work considerably. The SED chose to perceive the uprising as an act of Western subversion rather than as a display of dissatisfaction among its citizens and shut down avenues of transport and communication within East Germany and into the West. The East German reaction to the uprising caused a weeklong cessation of postal communication and the Bureau lost contact with its *Vertrauenspfarrer* and church partners across East Germany. Only in July could they resume communication between East and West Berlin, but now a sense of “greater risk” persisted with every letter.²²⁵ Heidborn, who up until this point had consistently referred to East Germany as the *Ostzone* or SBZ (Soviet Zone of Occupation) in her letters and reports, began to refer to East Germany as the *DDR* (German Democratic Republic) and crossed out the other two terms on eastbound post. She likely thought any small measure to decrease the chance of post confiscation or aggravating state officials was worth taking.

The mid-1950s into the early 1960s marked a period when conflicts over how best to memorialize the war dead under state socialism became more pressing. These years also marked a significant escalation in the East German state’s anti-church policies.²²⁶

²²⁵ “Vertraulicher Bericht April bis Dezember 1953,” EZA 4/1133.

²²⁶ As the SED pushed hard for collectivization, state appropriation of property and industry, and the “Kulturkampf” against the classical bulwarks of the bourgeois class between 1951 and 1961, notably the established churches, the focus of these efforts were on youth organizations and church educators. Pastors engaged in youth instruction were arrested for encouraging the youth to view the East German government with suspicion. Christian youth also faced expulsion from higher education and Gymnasium if they were involved with youth organizations, disseminating Christian materials, the wearing of Christian symbols while in school, and in some cases, schools expelled them for admitting Christian beliefs or association with Lutheran youth organizations publicly. Social and charitable work of the church also came under state repression. Otherwise, church structures remained intact, and the right of private confession was not infringed. After Stalin’s death, these efforts softened somewhat but continued with intermittent waves of repressions. The construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 ended the need for these repressions as church attendance began to decline, and church influence in education thoroughly removed. The SED promoted a protestant

Government officials at the local and national level exercised more influence in this area traditionally dominated by the church, and in recent decades by the Volksbund. The East German state challenged the church more openly now than in the early years of East Germany. Due to its size, location for memorial services, and recognition among both East and West Germans, the Halbe cemetery was the first to be pulled into this escalating conflict. In 1953, pastor Ernst Teichmann attempted to erect a simple oak cross in the center of the *Waldfriedhof* (forest cemetery). The cross, already completed and in storage on the premises, still required approval from the local administrators. The Berlin Bureau and the EKD grew concerned over the delay to approve a matter that had normally been trivial and assured. In 1955 the president of the Hessen-Nassau Church Martin Niemöller entered the affair and asked Otto Nuschke, chief of the Church Office within the Council of Minister, directly why state officials were rejecting plans to place a cross on a cemetery.²²⁷ In October 1956, Niemöller held a church service in Halbe and lent support to pastor Ernst Teichmann's attempt to erect a the cross in the center of the forest cemetery. Niemöller again appealed directly to Otto Nuschke in the secretariat for Church Affairs to help expedite its approval.²²⁸

A letter from the chairman of the district Council of Potsdam to the Ministry of Church affairs in 1956 also revealed that state officials considered a cross in Halbe “a competition with our own planned monument” and expressed the view that “there is already barely a cemetery in Germany without a cross.”²²⁹ The number of visitors to the Halbe cemetery in 1957 was significant: 600 visitors arrived weekly from within East Germany and

church that sought peace and worked within State-Socialism, even if the long-term goal was the eventual dying out of religion. See: Rudolf Mau, *Der Protestantismus im Osten Deutschlands (1945-1990)*. Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen IV/3, (Leipzig, 2005), 47-50; Martin Greschat, *Protestantismus im Kalten Krieg: Kirche, Politik und Gesellschaft im geteilten Deutschland; 1945 – 1963*, (Paderborn München Wien Zürich, 2010), 35-40.

²²⁷ Letter from Martin Niemöller to Minister of Church Affairs Otto Nuschke 24.10.2022, BArch DO 4/2173.

²²⁸ „Vertraulicher Bericht 1956,“ EZA 4/1133, pg 4.

²²⁹ “Brief an den Stellvertreter des Vorsitzenden des Rates des Bezirkes Potsdam Herr Sauer“ 14.11.1956, BArch DO 4/2173.

on holidays or in the summer months thousands of visitors came from the Federal Republic, West Berlin, and abroad.²³⁰ The East German state's interest in claiming, or perhaps mitigating, the site's commemorative potential for the church and Germans more broadly demonstrated the importance placed by the SED on denying Halbe its nationalist potency. In 1960, state officials erected instead a central monument in the form of a stele and a bowl of fire. The text on the monument is rather reserved given the polemical inclinations of East German state commemorations: *Die Toten mahnen, für den Frieden zu leben* (The dead urge us to live for peace).²³¹ The East German state, however, continued to refuse the presence of a cross in the Halbe cemetery until 1990 and justified its intransigence by stating they would not tolerate any symbols of "fascist military chaplaincy in Halbe."²³² The state clearly wanted to claim its commemorative hegemony over Halbe and deny the church any role.

Another struggle over the war graves occurred on the coastal border between Poland and the GDR on the Baltic Sea. On a hilltop known locally as *Der Golm* on the island of Usedom and on the border with Poland, the Protestant church of Pomerania and the East German state disagreed over the design of the war graves – even before the Volksbund's involvement through the Berlin Bureau. Like Halbe, the struggle originated with the construction of a cross in the early 1950s for the war graves at the Golm. Originally, local administrators agreed to the church's planned commemoration at the site, but the recent history and memory of the Golm proved to be too controversial. An American bombing raid on March 12, 1945, on the port city of Swinemünde (Świnoujście) whose harbor housed naval ships and served as a point of arrival for refugees fleeing the Red Army in East Prussia

²³⁰ Ulrich, *Volksbund*, 387.

²³¹ Ulrich, *Volksbund*, 386.

²³² "Brief an den Stellvertreter des Vorsitzenden des Rates des Bezirkes Potsdam Herr Sauer" 14.11.1956, BArch DO 4/2173.

killed between 4000 and 4500 people according to more recent studies.²³³ The Golm was once a park on an elevated green space with the view of the city, harbor, and Baltic Sea. Starting in 1944, the park became a mass grave for soldiers and sailors who died in Swinemünde's makeshift hospitals as wounded were brought from the front.²³⁴

The site had a long history of controversy that started with agreeing on the number of people who were killed in the attack. No concrete estimates were available in the first post war years. Dr. Herbert Achtenberg, the superintendent of the Protestant Church of Pomerania responsible for the Golm cemetery, suggested in 1950 that 8000-10,000 were killed based on the amount of war dead buried on the Golm, likely confusing some soldier graves for civilians. State publications from the 1960s inflated the number to 23,000 without citing any statistical findings.²³⁵ With a perceived death toll on par with the fire-bombing of Dresden, the Golm now had propagandistic potential for the SED. The high civilian death toll due to American bombers late in the war could feed the narrative that working class Germans were victims of American Capitalists as well as German Fascists, blurring the lines between war dead and civilian dead within a class struggle. In letters from state and some church officials, the attack in Swinemünde was often described as an “American terror attack,” “Imperialist barbarism” or as a *Tieffliegerangriff*, a “low flying assault,” suggesting images of low flying American fighter planes strafing civilians with machine gun fire even though there is no record of fighter planes strafing the city during the March 12 attack.

However, the SED knew that bringing attention to the Golm as a site of remembrance had the potential for negative consequences. Commemorating war dead at the hands of Americans would unintentionally highlight a conflicted relationship with its fellow socialist

²³³ Köhler, Nils. „Die Geschichte der Opferzahlen und die Fragen der Tieffliegerangriffe in Swinemünde am 12.März 1945,“ in: *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V. (Hg): Der Golm und die Tragödie von Swinemünde. Kriegsgräber als Wegweiser zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft*, Karlshagen, 2011, pg. 189

²³⁴ Ulrich, *Volksbund*, 393.

²³⁵ Nils Köhler, “Die Geschichte der Opferzahlen,“ 189.

states as the city where the attack occurred now belonged to Poland. The Yalta and Potsdam conferences established the Oder-Neiße line as the new border between Germany and Poland but only up to the bay of Stettin (Szczecin). The Baltic barrier islands at the bay's mouth were not mentioned in the negotiations. Germans on the island of Usedom expected to remain in German territory until the Soviet Military administration unilaterally adjusted the boundary to bisect the island, just West of Swinemünde in September 1945.²³⁶ The harbor was of strategic importance for the Soviets, who would much rather pass it to Poland rather than to their former enemy. Thousands of German inhabitants had to unexpectedly leave their homes. Many Germans in the region felt this was a further insult after already suffering defeat, occupation, and the loss of the Eastern provinces. The new Polish communist government, for its part, was also uneasy of Germans, East or West, making future claims against their territorial sovereignty.

In addition, the circumstances around the attack did not lend itself easily to the SED's anti-Western propaganda or memory politics. Even though many civilians were killed, the German *Kriegsmarine* had stationed its ships and some heavy naval guns in the harbor to be used against the Red Army's Pomeranian offensive. It was the Red Army high command that requested the American bombers to hit Swinemünde identifying it as a military target.²³⁷ It is unknown whether SED officials were fully aware of the degree of Soviet involvement, but they were aware that the German civilians killed there were fleeing the Red Army. Many of the Germans who sought to memorialize the Golm were expellees from the east. Unlike in neighboring West Germany, expellees living in East Germany could not organize as a political interest group. They were one of the last groups the SED wanted to commemorate.

²³⁶ Bernd Aischmann, "Die Grenzziehung auf der Insel Usedom 1945-1951: Hat Polen Usedom besetzt?" in: *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V. (Hg): Der Golm und die Tragödie von Swinemünde. Kriegsgräber als Wegweiser zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft*, Karlshagen, 2011, pg. 307.

²³⁷ Rolf-Dieter Müller, "Der Angriff auf Swinemünde im Kontext der alliierten Luftkriegsstrategie" in *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V. (Hg): Der Golm und die Tragödie von Swinemünde. Kriegsgräber als Wegweiser zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft*, Karlshagen, 2011, p.147.

In fall 1953, The local town council in Wolgast, the political municipality responsible for the Golm, was controlled by members of the CDU-Ost bloc party and supported these efforts. The council approved the construction of a plain but prominent thirteen-meter high wooden cross to feature on the Golm early on. Dr. Herbert Achtenberg, the superintendent of the protestant church in Pomerania and later a *Vertrauenspfarrer* for the Berlin Bureau, erected the cross in 1954 and planned to consecrate it on Easter Monday. In the meantime, the members of the Wolgast district council were replaced with SED members, who disapproved of their predecessors' cooperation with the church concerning the Golm. The SED dominated council retracted the approval for the cross, claiming that the land remained secular, not church property. The council further asserted that cross represented a "glorification of Fascism and Militarism on the peaceful boundary between Germany and Poland."²³⁸ One day after the council released its decision, someone cut down and destroyed the cross, leaving the scattered timbers in the nearby forest. The Bishop in Greifswald Karl von Scheven wrote to Otto Nuschke, to decry this action as an "intolerable violation of religious sensibilities" and requested an expedited reparation from the state.²³⁹ Nuschke admitted in a letter to another church official that the affair on the Golm had the potential to become an international issue because the cross was only a few meters from the border and could be interpreted as a demonstration against Poland.²⁴⁰ The Golm remained without a memorial for many years thereafter. By 1966, Achtenberg shared the addresses of families with loved ones buried on the Golm with the Berlin Bureau, who then could ask the church directly to erect name plates and crosses, circumventing state intransigence.²⁴¹ The church implemented the plan partially before the state once again intervene a few years later. The

²³⁸ "Aktennotiz" Council of Wolgast, 17.04.1954, D30, EZA 4/1131.

²³⁹ Letter to Otto Nuschke from Bishop Karl von Scheven, D26-29, EZA 4/1131.

²⁴⁰ "Vermerk" Letter from Otto Nuschke to Dr. Grüber 06.05.1954, D32, EZA 4/1131.

²⁴¹ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 394.

struggle for commemorating the Golm continued into the 1970s, which will be covered in the next chapter.

In 1956, East Germany joined the four Geneva conventions for the protection of war graves. With it, responsibility for the care of war graves fell into state hands when it went into effect in 1957 despite the fact that there was often a lack of materials and personnel available. The Berlin Bureau attempted to use this status change to push the SED to uphold its obligations to protect war graves on its territory. The state, however, used the Geneva convention to justify its restrictions against church involvement in the care of war graves. The Berlin Bureau had to find new arrangements as the East German state now claimed jurisdiction over areas traditionally reserved for the church. In the largely rural Oder region where scattered dead from the Second World War outnumbered the living in some towns, the task of identifying and reburying the dead was impossible despite state directives. Out of practicality, the Berlin Bureau obtained the permission from a few town mayors in some districts to operate despite the general ban on its work.

The Berlin Bureau, working through the established churches had to be careful when working on state administered property even with permission from local officials. In one instance in August 1957, the mayor of the village of Thurnow in the district of Neusteglititz approved the reburial of scattered war graves by a regional *Vertrauenspfarrer*.²⁴² Personnel provided by the mayor performed the reburials while the *Vertrauenspfarrer* provided the materials and money for the project. The Berlin Bureau then forwarded information regarding the reburials and its permission to work in Thurnow to the Interior Ministry for the sake of transparency.²⁴³ It wanted to depict its work as acting within the new policy since the secular authority carried out the physical labor. Notably, this also included a complaint from the

²⁴² "Vertraulicher Bericht über einen Teil der Tätigkeit der Abteilung Gräberfürsorge im Jahre 1957," 13.01.1958, EZA 4/1133.

²⁴³ "Brief an die Regierung der DDR Innen Ministerium Betr. Verstreut liegende Soldatengräber" 24.01.1958, EZA 4/1133.

villagers to their local pastor about the disrespectful way the village officials handled the remains. Echoing Ernst Teichmann's complaints in Halbe a few years prior, the personnel stored the remains in "open sacks" and handled them with little respect according to the complaint.²⁴⁴ The Secretary for Church Affairs Otto Nuschke considered the Lutheran church's undertakings "abrasive actions against state directives" and warned that if such interference in state affairs continued, necessary consequences would follow.²⁴⁵ Gertrude Heidborn insisted that this was only a misunderstanding. She argued that the church had restricted direct involvement in reburial efforts to church properties and registered all work with the Ministry of the Interior.²⁴⁶ Heidborn's argument was likely an attempt to establish some plausible deniability – that the Berlin Bureau was acting in good faith to work with state officials rather than finding a way to circumvent it. The Berlin Bureau remained in the region to report discovered graves to the Interior Ministry and hoped that this would spur more state cooperation.

A report from the council for the district of Frankfurt an der Oder sent to the Secretary for Church Affairs in September 1958 implicated the church in illegal reburial efforts further. The council reported that the exhumations of remains from Seelow, Fürstenwalde, und Strausberg to the soldier's cemetery in Müncheberg had been forbidden since November 6, 1957, but had continued anyway. Some council members held a meeting with pastors Hilsberg, Fritsche, Schreiber, and Mehs who were in service of the Lutheran church and the Berlin Bureau. After this meeting, the pastors reported back to the Berlin Bureau and received word from Gertrude Heidborn that they were to restrict their work to human remains on church cemeteries. The previous year, the Berlin Bureau provided them with 1000 DM to help fund this specific task. They explained that there were still many scattered graves, whose

²⁴⁴ "Vermerk 18.02.1958, " EZA 4/1133.

²⁴⁵ "Brief an die Kirchenkanzlei der EKD Berliner Stelle" 05.02.1958, EZA 4/1133.

²⁴⁶ "Vermerk 18.02.1958, " EZA 4/1133.

identification materials could gradually disappear. They did not have documents or identification materials pertaining to the dead but relied on oral information from locals. They gave a specific example that in Strausberg there were seventeen fallen soldiers who were hastily buried under only a “handsbreadth” of earth. The pastors explained the justification for their illegal work as thus: “These soldiers were buried hastily from the lazarette or after the battle and still had their identification materials on them. That meant they were still listed as missing, never reported dead, and there were relatives who are long overdue to be notified.”²⁴⁷ They insisted the state efforts in this area had been lacking, while they had been active here for five years.

An additional report from the district council in Frankfurt an der Oder from May 1959 revealed that officials there were concerned with more than just the church overstepping its bounds. It described a case in which Lutheran officials, in communication with relatives, were actively exhuming remains on communal land. The council indicated that it was fine with the church, under approval of the local government, exhuming and reburying remains on its own property but suspected that it would try to “erect individualized memorials dedicated to German militarism.”²⁴⁸ The gravestones erected by the Lutheran church and Berlin bureau were indeed quite plain, often just small crosses, headstones, or plaques with names, birth and death dates, as well as military rank if known. Notified families would often request flowers or wreaths to be placed at the grave and a photograph to be sent if travel to the gravesite was not possible for political or health reasons. One could argue that a gravestone with one’s military rank inscribed upon it is also a monument to militarism. However, if SED officials wanted to find memorials to German militarism, most town centers had at least one and they were much more obvious in their intent. For example, the town of Müllrose, just fifteen

²⁴⁷ “Bericht Rat des Bezirks Frankfurt Oder den 30.09.1958,” BArch DO 1/16929.

²⁴⁸ “Rat des Bezirks Dresden ab. Innere Angelegenheiten 06.06.1955,” DO 4/2162.

kilometers outside Frankfurt an der Oder had (and still has) a large monument to the fallen of the First World War featured prominently in its town park. In 1955, Bremenheim and Steinbach, two suburbs of Dresden, restored their First World War era monuments that included inscriptions “*Für Kaiser und Vaterland.*”²⁴⁹ The SED officials clearly chose to ignore or tolerate these secular monuments while taking issue with those erected by the church.

Moreover, the Lutheran church was quite sensitive about the design and interpretation of memorials on church property, especially in sacral spaces such as church crypts and altars. In 1954, pastor Christian Rietschel of Radebeul in Saxony composed a set of seven guidelines for other church leaders to follow. His essay ended up widely distributed through letters, church circulars, and church publications in both East and West Germany in 1954 and 1955. The guidelines can be summarized in seven points:

1. If the erection of memorials is handled by secular authorities, the church communities and church organizations should, as far as their cooperation is possible, influence a design in the Christian sense... The message of the Lord who died and rose was entrusted to the church and who took power from death. In this message alone lie the powers of true consolation for all who mourn the dead of war.

Pastor Rietschel advocated here for the renewed Christian emphasis on death and resurrection, which was part of a larger effort of the established churches to reassert Christianity in post-war Europe. The fact that pastor Rietschel wanted more overt Christian motifs in memorial design, even if handled by the state, is significant, especially considering that he wrote this in East Germany.

2. The design of memorials can no longer be done with the idea of honoring people or heroes, as was customary when the "*Ehrenmale*" were erected after the First World War... When creating Christian memorials, there is no room for self-confident national pathos to develop, but there is room for the expression of innermost solidarity with our German people and fatherland... In principle, there should no longer be any talk of hero memorials and war memorials.

²⁴⁹ Rat des Bezirks Dresden ab. Innere Angelegenheiten 06.06.1955, DO 4/2162.

3. In accordance with the character of the last world war, the memorials should not only apply to the soldiers who fell on the battlefields, but also include all those who died at home in the war or because of the war.

These two points signify concrete ways in which new memorials were to break with the national chauvinism of the recent past, but still make room for “national pathos” within a common Christian community. Notably, Rietschel wrote of one German people and fatherland, inferring that a common German national community remained united in a renewed cultural community even if divided politically – an overly optimistic for outlook for Cold War Germany even in 1954. His third point emphasized further how the nature of war time death changed significantly during the Second World War because the highest death toll was among civilians and other non-combatants. He remained rather vague about what fell under “because of war” and whether the Nazi’s genocidal policies fit into these categories. His next four points outlined the appropriate design, maintenance, biblical inscriptions, and positioning of memorials within church spaces to enhance a Christian message rather than a nationalist one.²⁵⁰ Rietschel interestingly considered it more important to separate the physical church space from any national commemoration than to dial back Christian oriented commemoration. Later generations of East German pastors would follow this approach in the hopes of better melding these Christian ideas with life under state socialism.

A 1967 circular from the church leadership of the Lutheran church of Brandenburg-Berlin contained guidelines that echoed the same principles pastor Rietschel had put forth a decade before, deemphasizing German nationalism and reaffirming Christianity’s role in memorialization. This included the removal and replacement of *Kriegerehrenmäler* – literal translation warrior monuments of honor – of the previous generation. The four-page draft stated that many churches have *Ehrenmäler* that were dedicated the wars in 1815, 1866, 1870 and contained statements such as “*Für König und Vaterland,*” but many contained ones from

²⁵⁰ “Kirchliches Amtsblatt der Ev. Kirch von Westfalen Nr. 12 Bielefeld, den 25.10.1954,“ EZA 2/3561.

the First and Second World Wars as well, and even some church bells with Swastikas. The text insisted that the memorial of war dead had to be theologically sound to not leave the wrong impression on the younger generation. It stated that these *Ehrenmäler* from the previous generation should be removed and replaced with ones that honor all war dead, from combat deaths to concentration camp victims, Jews who were deported and murdered abroad, bombing victims, and expelled Germans who died en route. The guidelines noted that peace and reconciliation among the nations was a major tenet of the church, Christianity, and many of the youth. The circular argued that “these older memorials will send the wrong message.”²⁵¹ The Protestant churches in both Germanies contained factions that sought an anti-nationalist approach to commemoration, but due to differing state ideologies, they had different challenges. For instance, as will be covered in later sections, the Protestant churches of West Germany had to contend with intense nationalist pushback, while in East Germany the prevailing question was how to best coexist with state socialism.

The Protestant churches in East Germany actively tried to remove monuments to German militarism and nationalism from their sacral spaces during the 1950s and 60s – more than what the SED had attempted at this time. The existence of these monuments well into the 1960s demonstrated that most state officials were willing to tolerate or overlook the existence of these more overt monuments to German militarism in East German small towns and suburbs. One possibility is that SED officials found it easier to tolerate these than the overt Christian memorial commemorations of lively and potentially subversive religious communities. The SED was waging an ideological war with the West and wished to mobilize the masses to build a communist utopia, and possibly die for it. It was perhaps easier for the SED to adapt the totalizing rhetoric of past German nationalism to their commemorative

²⁵¹ “Brief an das Ev. Konsistorium Berlin-Brandenburg von der Ev. Kirchenleitung Berlin-Brandenburg, den 02.08.1967, betr. Kriegerehrenmäler der Kirche,” ELAB 35/792.

narratives. After all, East Germany was the new socialist Fatherland for which East Germans were to devote all their efforts. An anti-nationalist Christianity could hinder such mobilization.

The Protestant Church's role in preserving German war graves was becoming a new potential justification for its persecution by the SED regime. The Secretary for Church Affairs and Interior Ministry officials continued to warn the Protestant churches about their work with the Berlin Bureau and threaten vague consequences, but they were sluggish in doing anything about it. Only in 1962, notably after the construction of the Berlin Wall when the churches were even more isolated from the West, did these state organizations attempt to take concrete actions against the Protestant churches and the Berlin Bureau. At the request of the Interior Ministry and the Secretary for Church Affairs, the *Arbeitsgruppe Kirchenfragen* of the Central Committee of the SED drafted a resolution against the Protestant churches.²⁵² The resolution proposed that "to protect the citizens of the German Democratic Republic from illegal actions and overreaches of religious institutions in the service... it is decreed to prohibit the activity of the Berlin Bureau, to confiscate all documents held by church officials and hand them over to the German Red Cross, and the Ministry of the Interior is to be responsible for its enforcement."²⁵³ The Minister of the Interior Karl Maron, justified his suggestions with the following accusations:

The Berliner Bureau is engaged in the investigation of war graves of the Second World War in the GDR and abroad. Under the pretense of helping and advising loved ones, they are propagating the revanchist, militarist war mongering of the Bonner Republic through the collection of addresses and distribution of Material. The Berlin Bureau sends invitations to citizens of the GDR to travel to [West Germany] or other capitalist countries for the dedication of war memorials, victims of war memorials, and individual graves. They also send requests to cover expenses and have even contacted the Volkspolizei for information on citizens. Any cooperation between the GDR and the Berlin Bureau is impossible. Despite many attempts of responsible

²⁵² "Brief vom Leiter der HVDVP (Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Volkspolizei) Winkelmann den 18.06.1962 an Leiter der Abt. Innere Angelegenheiten Bergmann, betr. Entwurf einer Beschlusvorlage zur Tätigkeit der Kirchenkanzlei der Evang. Kirche Abt. Gräberfürsorge," BArch DO 1/16929.

²⁵³ Brief an ZK der SED Kandidat des Politbüros Paul Verner Berlin den 15.08.1962, BArch DO 1/16929.

government bodies to ask the Berlin Bureau to cease their work, they continue to violate the laws of the GDR and abuse the feelings of GDR citizens for their aggressive political goals of the Bonner state to hinder normal relations between the GDR and foreign capitalist countries.²⁵⁴

The language of the resolution and the fact that it was distributed among high-ranking members of the Politburo, such as Paul Verner, made this the most serious attempt to stop the church and Volksbund. It also painted the Berlin Bureau as an extension of West German espionage. However, the resolution seemed to have failed here. The Central Committee or the Politburo never addressed the resolution in any of its sessions and it stayed in bureaucratic purgatory. In a letter exchange between Lieutenant General Herbert Grünstein, deputy Minister of the Interior, and Secretary of Church Affairs Hans Sägewasser in 1965, Grünstein asked if the resolution was ever implemented and indicated he still was receiving reports that the Protestant church and the Berlin Bureau were active.²⁵⁵ Sägewasser confirmed that the “suggestions of the resolution were not realized due to political considerations.”²⁵⁶ Sägewasser did not explain further what these considerations were, nor did Grünstein ask to clarify. What was clear was that the highest ranks of the SED had decided to tolerate the Volksbund’s activities indefinitely.

One can only speculate what political considerations caused the Central Committee of the SED, or more specifically Paul Verner to not take the suggested measures of the resolution. It is likely that by the 1960s, the SED leadership had decided they had persecuted the church far enough without provoking its citizens further. The suppression of the revolt on June 17, 1953, established the SED’s total dominance of the East German state, but only through the military support of the Soviet Union. Despite the rhetoric of socialist unity, the SED was suspicious of its own citizens and could not suffer another uprising lest they lose

²⁵⁴ Brief an ZK der SED Kandidat des Politbüros Paul Verner Berlin den 15.08.1962, BArch DO 1/16929.

²⁵⁵ “Brief des Generalleutenants Grünstein an Staatssekretär Seigewasser den 28.12.1965,” BArch DO 1/16929.

²⁵⁶ “Brief des Staatssekretärs Seigewasser für Kirchenfragen Mdl an Grünstein, Berlin den 02.02.1966, betr. Tätigkeit der Kirchenkanzlei der evang. Kirche Abt. Gräberfürsorge,” BArch DO 1/16929.

Moscow's faith in the party's ability to secure its own territory. East Germans accepted the SED's total political and economic control, but Christianity remained a critical part of cultural life for many East Germans born before socialism. The religious devotion to Marxism-Leninism patterned after Stalinism had not quite taken hold among all segments of East German society. The suggestions of the resolution would have required immense state interference within the affairs of the regional churches of East Germany. In order to seize documents related to the care of war graves and ministerial work with relatives, East German security services would have to raid rectories and church archives, which may have fomented more anti-state sentiments than it would have suppressed. After the construction of the Berlin Wall, even the SED knew it could only push internal suppression so far. The motivation for building the wall was to keep East Germans from leaving, and therefore stabilize East German society. Continued, open state repression could have undermined the image of stability.

In addition, Hans Sägewasser, who was a proponent such draconian measures against the Protestant church, was falling out of favor with the SED. His tactics of active harassment were only unifying church leaders with political dissidents. His own son Günther Sägewasser also fled to West Germany and became a vocal critic of Walter Ulbricht and the SED.²⁵⁷ It also may have been due to the consideration that the Protestant churches were funding this work on their own. Even in cases where state administrators had to provide personnel, the church still ended up paying for the materials and labor (reimbursed by the Volksbund). Many East Germans were requesting this work, and the state had no interest in engaging with it despite promises to the contrary. The state already had its group of victims to honor – Red Army soldiers, communist partisan fighters, and German communists killed in concentration camps. There was no room in their commemorative traditions for dead fascists. It was best if

²⁵⁷ "Ein Atheist in Pankows Kirchenamt," *Stuttgarter Zeitung* May 30, 1963, BArch DO 4/6019.

the church handled this task. In any case, by this point, the SED preferred infiltrating the churches with informants and state supporters under the pretense of unifying the church with state socialism. Although this did not stop the efforts of the Protestant churches, it continued the state's attempts to thwart them by other means.

The heightening of Cold War tensions in the early 1960s affected the work of the Volksbund and Protestant churches in East Germany. The construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 initially capped personal contact between the Berlin Bureau and East Germany but interchurch lines of communication allowed information to still flow. The fear of post control from East German officials led to the Berlin Bureau sending all its post into East Germany through church carriers.²⁵⁸ After 1961, due to the increased difficulty of crossing into East Berlin, more of the Berlin Bureau's duties and communication began to shift to the Protestant church's own chancery office located in East Berlin. This transfer of responsibilities was completed by 1969 marked by the creation of the *Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR* and finalizing the break with the Protestant churches in West Germany.

During this time of transition, the Berlin Bureau began including excerpts from letters from families in its reports to the Volksbund in Kassel and the Protestant churches. One report from December 1960 included pages of letters collected over the last ten years. Gertrud Heidborn's intent was to demonstrate that many East German citizens depended on their work to receive final solace knowing the final resting place of the remains of loved ones.²⁵⁹ The report indicated that its correspondence with relatives had continued to increase. Some relatives inquired about graves in East Germany while others asked if they could purchase flowers and wreaths to decorate graves abroad, or for photos of the grave.

²⁵⁸ Ulrich, *Volksbund*, 392.

²⁵⁹ "Bericht an die leitenden Verwaltungsbehörden der Gliedkirchen in der DDR von der Kanzlei der EKD Berliner Stelle Abt. Gräberfürsorge den 12.12.1960, betr. Arbeit der Abteilung Gräberfürsorge." EZA 2/2560.

Some letters emphasized the gratitude of families for finally learning of the fate and burial site of their loved ones, but they also revealed that many in East Germany were still participated in the same grieving rituals West Germans took for granted, albeit from afar. One woman wrote that she and her children have “thank-filled hearts” to know that their father is buried in Costermano “under the blue Italian sky, under the rustling cypresses, and now a part of the most superb patch on the Earth.”²⁶⁰ The woman requested a wreath placed, photo taken, and expresses the hope that “her children can one day be granted the chance to lay flowers in person.”²⁶¹ In another letter from 1958, one wrote “this letter not only found gratification among our family, but many in our village read the letter and are excited that there are still people who think on our dead and honor them.”²⁶² The East Germans in this town vicariously honored Germany’s fallen soldiers through the letter’s description, demonstrating that interest in commemorating German war dead had not yet withered away in East Germany.

Most letters expressed a similar sentiment to travel, or the hope that their children will be able to, often projecting fantastical descriptions of the location they had only seen through photos – perhaps a way to travel vicariously. In one letter from 1960, a woman wrote “it is a great solace now to know that my dear husband has found his final resting place in Dagneux, France... my youngest son handed me the letter with tears in his eyes.”²⁶³ She also revealed “it is also a great pain... I will probably never be granted to travel to stand at his grave and pray, but my children will not hesitate as soon as it is possible.”²⁶⁴ These letters validated the work of Volksbund and their church partners. Some may have committed themselves to this work out of nationalist sentiments or even out of an ideological desire to resist the SED-

²⁶⁰ “Anhang an OKR Behm von Kirchenkanzlei Berliner Stelle Abt. Gräberfürsorge” 03.08.1959, EZA 4/1133.

²⁶¹ “Anhang an OKR Behm von Kirchenkanzlei Berliner Stelle Abt. Gräberfürsorge” 03.08.1959, EZA 4/1133.

²⁶² “Bericht an die leitenden Verwaltungsbehörden der Gliedkirchen in der DDR von der Kanzlei der EKD Berliner Stelle Abt. Gräberfürsorge den 12.12.1960, betr. Arbeit der Abteilung Gräberfürsorge.” EZA 2/2560.

²⁶³ “Auszüge und Sätze aus Dankesbriefen,” EZA 4/1133.

²⁶⁴ “Auszüge und Sätze aus Dankesbriefen,” EZA 4/1133.

regime in one small way, but the emotional nature of this work added another element of political fulfillment. They were not helping underground dissidents overthrow the state or push a particular ideology, at least not consciously, but trying to bring long-overdue solace and comfort, denied first by the chaos at the end of the war and later by extenuating political circumstances, to grieving families. This was another need that the SED regime failed to provide, and the work of the Berlin Bureau subtly reminded East Germans of that fact. The Volksbund and the Berlin Bureau saw its works as no less than keeping Christian tradition alive in the atheist East.

The East German families who authored these letters held on privately to the memories of their own war dead, while the SED demanded public admiration of the Red Army and communist resistance fighters. Similar struggles occurred in other Eastern bloc nations where state-socialism suppressed the commemoration of national heroes, victims of the Red Army's "liberation," and other war time experiences of their citizens. In Poland, the Communist regime suppressed the brutal massacre of Polish intelligentsia, national leaders, and officials by the Red Army first in its agreed partition of Poland with the Nazis, – the massacre of 22,000 Poles in April 1940 in the Katyn forest for instance– and again later in the war when the Red Army occupied all of Poland.²⁶⁵ The post-war socialist regime of Yugoslavia repressed memories of inter-ethnic conflict in favor of state narratives of south Slavic unity against the German invaders. Ethnic, inter-communal violence between Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians broke out across multi-ethnic communities of Yugoslavia during the German occupation. In the small rural region of Kulen Vakuf, today in modern day Croatia, two-thousand Bosnians and Croats were killed by their Serb neighbors.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Allen Paul. "The Quest for Truth." In *Katyn: Stalin's Massacre and the Triumph of Truth* (Cornell University Press, 2010), 347.

²⁶⁶ See: Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*, (Cornell University Press, 2016).

Ironically, the SED's decision to tolerate the care of German war graves by the Protestant church did more to undermine the project than active repression would have. By 1965, The Berlin Bureau started to experience a turnover in both its own personnel and the *Vertrauenspfarrer*. Gertrude Martens-Heidborn retired from her position by the end of 1964 and was replaced by Dr. Nora Noth in January 1965, all the other original staff gradually left by 1969, and some of the older *Vertrauenspfarrer* of the First World War generation began to step down due to age. More and more younger pastors had either little interest in the work and wanted to focus on integrating the church into state socialism rather than engaging in activities that irritated the SED. There also existed a greater willingness to encourage the disappearance, either through neglect or active erasure, of German war graves. They symbolized Germany's fascist and capitalist past, as well as the defeat, suffering, and ignominy of the post war years. This changing view on German war graves became another generational difference. Pastors in early East and West Germany had similar experiences, backgrounds, and theological/ideological training before 1945, whereas the following generation, raised and trained in East Germany were more willing to embrace state socialism. These growing issues became the main struggle for the Volksbund and the churches of East Germany as the Second World War receded further into the past, which will be covered in the next chapter.

The Push for a New War Graves Law

As the dust settled from the Volksbund's dispute over *Volkstrauertag* with the Protestant churches, the Volksbund shifted its focus to its main duty of caring for German war graves abroad. The War graves law of 1952, combined with Chancellor Adenauer's mandate provided them with the authority to do so. To the surprise of both Protestants and the Interior Ministry, the Volksbund signaled an interest to change the War Graves law in 1956. The Volksbund wanted war graves, including those on church grounds, to serve as

national memorials and restructured into *Sammelanlagen*, or tightly packed rows of uniform graves. The shift demonstrated the Volksbund's decision to finally abandon the *Totenburg*, championed by architect Robert Tischler of the interwar and Nazi eras, and emulate American and Western European military cemeteries.²⁶⁷

The Protestant and Catholic churches of West Germany found this suggestion inappropriate. Protestant High Consistory Otto von Harling argued that these men "have already sacrificed their lives for the *Fatherland* and they should at least have their individuality respected in death."²⁶⁸ The Protestant churches argued against the proposal of the Volksbund that reburials could not take place on the cemeteries without the consent of surviving relatives. Furthermore, there was little guarantee of enforcement of compensation on the side of the *Bundesländer* in the law due to legal ambiguity, so the church could be stuck with a bill that the Volksbund ordered.²⁶⁹

The Volksbund's request set in motion changes to the War Graves Law that inadvertently led to expanded protections to murdered victims of the Nazis in 1965. The church protests led to the West German Ministry reviewing how the 1952 had been implemented at the local level. Like what the SED discovered regarding funerary law and custom in their territory, West Germany's Interior Ministry knew that every city, town, and region had their own customs and laws that ran counter to the War Graves law of 1952. The same archaic limited resting periods for remains (*Ruhefriste*) that the SED had to contend with in East Germany existed in West Germany. Towns had anywhere between fifteen- and thirty-year limits, after which, if not renewed by loved ones, the grave would be opened, the remains removed or buried deeper, and the grave reoccupied with the remains of another.

²⁶⁷ "Bericht betr. Novelle zum Kriegsgräbergesetz," EZA 2/2560.

²⁶⁸ Brief an den Herrn Bmdl Bonn von OKR von Harling Hannover den 05.09.1956, betr. Novelle zum Kriegsgräbergesetz," EZA 2/2560.

²⁶⁹ "Brief an den Herrn Bmdl Bonn von OKR von Harling Hannover den 05.09.1956, betr. Novelle zum Kriegsgräbergesetz," EZA 2/2560.

Due to space limits, a grave was seldom erased or abandoned. These disjointed policies slowed the negotiation process with the individual interior ministries of the *Bundesländer*, keeping it in a bureaucratic purgatory.

By 1962, the issue of revising the 1952 law received new attention but for very different reasons than when it began. In April, the SPD fraction in the Bundestag issued a “small inquiry” (*Kleine Anfrage*) to the Interior Ministry asking how it defined “*Kriegsgräber*” and whether this included civilians and victims of violent regime (*Opfer von Gewaltherrschaft*) in its understanding. The SPD inquiry then argued that in 1922 when this word was officially accepted as a legal term, the civilian death toll of the First World War was minimal compared to the Second World War where the civilian death toll outweighed military deaths by the millions. The SPD criticized the use of this term without including the “millions of Jews, Russians, Poles, handicapped, and political dissidents” and claimed the Volksbund continued to use the term in its traditional definition and showed no “probative effort to the contrary.”²⁷⁰ The SPD argued that Bonn was more committed to preserving the graves of fallen SS and *Einsatzkommando* soldiers than the millions of victims of the Nazis whose graves have been leveled and added that those who celebrate Volkstrauertag must make an effort to commemorate these dead on this day as well.²⁷¹ Minister of the Interior Hermann Höcherl of the CSU did not engage in a debate with the SPD, and only replied that he enforced the law as it was written.²⁷²

Some Protestant leaders expressed disappointment in the Interior Ministry’s response and asked if the conference of Interior Ministers of the *Bundesländer* decided to implement

²⁷⁰ “Bemerkungen zur Antwort des Bundes-Ministers auf die Kleine Anfrage der SPD vom 04.04.1962,” EZA 2/2560.

²⁷¹ “Bemerkungen zur Antwort des Bundes-Ministers auf die Kleine Anfrage der SPD vom 04.04.1962,” EZA 2/2560.

²⁷² “Bemerkungen zur Antwort des Bundes-Ministers auf die Kleine Anfrage der SPD vom 04.04.1962,” EZA 2/2560.

legal protection of the graves of victims of National socialism.²⁷³ The Interior Minister of Lower Saxony replied that the conference supported granting the same the protection for the graves of victims of the Nazi regime as traditional war graves and were interested in amending War Graves Law.²⁷⁴ Some Protestant leaders supported the effort, but many Protestants still felt uneasy about shifting commemorative attention towards victims of the Nazis.

In 1964, while the Auschwitz trials were underway in Frankfurt am Main, the *Frankfurter Bund für Volksbildung e.V.* and other partners organized a traveling exhibit on the infamous death camp and German complicity in the horrors that took place. The organization sent a letter in early December 1964 to the Protestant Chancery in Hannover requesting it to contribute funds to support the ongoing exhibition which had already been displayed in several cities.²⁷⁵ Hannover did not reply, but rather its annex office in Frankfurt. The Chancery insisted that the financing of the exhibit in Frankfurt was “not a matter for the Protestant churches as a whole” but “the business of the local church,” which was the regional church of Hessen.²⁷⁶ The director of the *Frankfurter Bund für Volksbildung* Carl Tesch followed with another letter in January 1965. Tesch explained that the Lutheran church of Hessen insisted that only the Chancery in Hannover was authorized to make such a donation.²⁷⁷ Tesch picked up on Protestant reluctance to contribute to the Auschwitz exhibit and implored the Chancery “to reconsider and review its position.”²⁷⁸

²⁷³ “Brief an den Herrn Innenminister Niedersachsen Hannover von OKR von Harling den 06.07.1962, Bezug Kleine Anfrage der SPD-Fraktion im Bundestag,” EZA 2/2560.

²⁷⁴ “Brief an die Kanzlei der EKD Hannover vom Innenminister Niedersachsen den 30.07.1962,” EZA 2/2560.

²⁷⁵ “Brief an die EKD Kirchenkanzlei Hannover von EKD Kirchliches Aussenamt Frankfurt am Main (OKR Hohlfeld) den 22.12.1964, betr. Ausstellung über die KZ Lager Auschwitz,” EZA 2/3561.

²⁷⁶ “Brief an die EKD Kirchliches Außenamt Frankfurt am Main von EKD Kirchenkanzlei den 06.01.1965, betr. Ausstellung über die KZ Auschwitz, Bezug Dortiges Schreiben vom 22.12.1964,” EZA 2/3561.

²⁷⁷ “Brief an EKD Kirchenkanzlei Hannover von Frankfurter Bund für Volksbildung e.V. Direktor Carl Tesch den 21.01.1965,” EZA 2/3561.

²⁷⁸ “Brief an EKD Kirchenkanzlei Hannover von Frankfurter Bund für Volksbildung e.V. Direktor Carl Tesch den 21.01.1965,” EZA 2/3561.

The Chancery in Hannover defended its decision contributors by claiming “it only has funds as far as the regional churches are willing to allocate. Therefore, the Chancery is limited in contributions exclusively to inter church work. The funds for 1965 have already been allocated, and so for this reason we regret that we cannot provide any contributions.”²⁷⁹ Carl Tesch replied two days later only sharing that the Lutheran and United Lutheran churches in Hessen had given a combined donation of 1000 DM for the exhibit.²⁸⁰

This incident aside, one interfaith activist organization, largely dominated by Protestants, played a critical role in promoting engagement with the Nazi past more generally, and specifically amending the War Graves law – the *Hilfstelle für Rasseverfolgte* (Help Center for People Persecuted by Race). Pastor Fritz Majer-Leonhard founded the *Hilfstelle* in September 1945 to assist Concentration Camp survivors rebuild their lives after liberation. Later in the post-war period, he added promoting the memory of all victims of the Nazis as one of the *Hilfstelle*'s causes, in particular victims of the Nazi Euthanasia program.²⁸¹ The *Hilfstelle* advocated for a collective and equitable memorialization for the victims of the Nazis as a corrective to previous narratives. In the early 1960s, the *Hilfstelle* organized a printed media campaign for the memory-political equality of victims of Nazi campaigns of violence and extermination with military and civilian war dead in both the War Graves law and *Volkstrauertag*.

The *Hilfstelle* accused the Interior Ministry and the Volksbund of continuing a traditional war graves definition that had developed through the experience of past conflicts. An Interior ministry official claimed in 1962 that the millions of killed civilians (concentration camp victims, forced laborers, deportees, euthanasia victims, victims of

²⁷⁹ “Brief an Direktor des Frankfurter Bundes für Volksbildung e.V. Frankfurt a.M von EKD Kirchenkanzlei den 01.02.1965, betr. Ausstellung über KZ Auschwitz, Bezug Dortiges Schreiben vom 27.01.1965,” EZA 2/3561.

²⁸⁰ “Brief an EKD Kirchenkanzlei Hannover von Frankfurter Bund für Volksbund e.V. Direktor Carl Tesch den 29.01.1965,” EZA 2/3561.

²⁸¹ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 340.

starvation etc.) could not be considered victims of the direct effects of war under German law.²⁸² The idea of remembering all dead during years of war as war dead, well established in Western Europe, was not so foreign a concept, but some Germans connected it with occupiers justice being forced upon them. In Germany, the land of the aggressors and principal culprits, it was especially problematic to indicate Nazi extermination policies as a consequence of war, which, even if unintentional, obscured its racist and genocidal character.

The *Hilfstelle* on the other hand propagated an expanded war graves definition that placed victims of Nazi tyranny on an equal legal footing based on the notion that they were also victims of a modern total war. The *Hilfstelle* proclaimed in 1962 “as far as we are concerned, all victims of war across Western Europe are war dead, and everyone deserves its grave.”²⁸³ The *Hilfstelle*’s exclusion of Eastern Europe is here notable, but likely a result of the fact that war graves in the East were inaccessible. The debate within West Germany was focused on the graves within its territory and that of the states with which Bonn had agreements, all of which were part of Western Europe. The *Hilfstelle*’s statement aggravated the Volksbund and its veteran partner organization *Ring deutscher Soldaten*.

However, in its effort for recognition, the *Hilfstelle* helped to produce a commemorative formula that threatened to mask the singularity of suffering and death under Nazi persecution and execution. At the time, this was considered a progressive step forward for a more liberal commemorative practice. Later scholars underscored, however, the new issues this created. Historian Bill Niven in his book *Facing the Nazi Past* wrote of an “All victims together” paradigm or the idea of leveling both German victims and victims of the Nazis to the same level of victimhood and often buttressed by the Christian notion of equality in death. This attempt at universalization of victimhood tended to alienate Jewish survivors

²⁸² Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 341.

²⁸³ “Bekommen sie keine Kriegsgräber?” Brochure of the *Hilfstelle für Rasseverfolgte* 1962, Volksbund Archive C. 1-5.

and other victim groups who could not meld the brutal experiences of their persecuted loved ones with fallen German soldiers and civilians, who in many cases were the same who supported or perpetrated the persecution of others. Reinhard Kosselleck referred to this cynically as the “*bundesrepublikanische Formel*,” (federal formula) which he also criticized for its tendency to obscure the radically different experiences of death and persecution during the Second World War.²⁸⁴ This commemorative approach solved some older issues but created others that persist to the present day.

However, these faults were not the reason why the Volksbund pushed so hard against the *Hilfsstelle*. In his study on the Volksbund’s influence on German memorial culture, journalist Bernd Ulrich described the Volksbund as having a pattern of not clearly formulating its position to such issues publicly – opting for strategic ambiguity instead. Only an investigation of internal or private communications reveals the real motivations. The *Hilfsstelle* wrote in 1963,

we have asked this organization for months for a clear position to the question of war graves, and still have received no real answer. Its publications do not address this question either. Many of their own members have no idea about the legal pitfalls regarding the graves of Euthanasia victims. One almost has the impression, that the leadership are completely ignorant of such victims.²⁸⁵

Some regional branches of the Volksbund were more willing to engage the question but fell into a negative zero-sum view of the solution: either the Volksbund remained responsible for only soldier graves, or the Volksbund must be burdened with the care of all war graves.

The *Hilfsstelle*’s campaign for amending the War Graves Law of 1952 was ultimately successful. The Bundestag ratified the changes on July 1, 1965. One change that helped gain support for the amendment was granting victims of “communist tyranny” the same legal protections as well. This paralleled the changes made to the *Totenehrung* portion of the main

²⁸⁴ Kosselleck, Seidel, Weichlein, “Mies, medioker, und provinzielle,” 1995, pg. 107.

²⁸⁵ Ulrich et al., Volksbund, 342.

Volkstrauertag ceremony in Bonn where officials included victims of the June 17, 1953 uprising and other “victims of a divided Europe” in the mid-1960s. This applied the totalitarian paradigm, placing Stalinism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union alongside Nazism, and therefore victims of communist oppression alongside victims of the Nazis. *Bundespräsident* Heinrich Lübke referred to East Germany as “one whole concentration camp” as he did in his first New Year’s address after the construction of the Berlin Wall.²⁸⁶

The Volksbund along with veteran organizations initially rejected this argument, but increasingly saw the anti-Communist rhetoric as a serviceable concession during negotiations. As if congratulating a respected foe, Volksbund President Walter Trepte conceded victory to pastor Majer-Leonhard on his “successful efforts to grant the victims of tyranny (*Opfer der Gewaltherrschaft*) the perpetual right to rest and ensuring the care and preservation of their graves.”²⁸⁷ Most veterans were on board though. They responded that they were “affected by the fact that we must fight the mixing between a soldier’s death and the death in the concentration camps. Among the camp victims there were criminals of all categories, which soldiers would have no reason to honor.”²⁸⁸ By 1965, these sentiments were against the tide in leading institutions such as the federal government and the Protestant Church, but still found resonance among veteran organizations and other conservative segments of the West German public.

Unlike the struggle over the war graves law, the Volksbund exercised more control over the evolving form and content of the main *Volkstrauertag* ceremony in Bonn. From 1952 until 1959 the Volksbund experimented with the form of *Volkstrauertag* and the Adenauer administration gave them a free hand. State involvement in planning and staging

²⁸⁶ Manfred Hettling, “Militärisches Ehrenmal oder politisches Denkmal? Repräsentationen des toten Soldaten in der Bundesrepublik,” in: Herfried Münkler/ Jens Hacke (Hg.), *Wege in die neue Bundesrepublik: Politische Mythen, kollektive Selbstbilder, gesellschaftliche Identitätspräsentation*, Frankfurt/M, 2009, pg. 136.

²⁸⁷ Letter to Pastor Majer-Leonhard from VDK President Trepte, 09.12.1965, Volksbund Archive A. 10-166

²⁸⁸ Hettling, “Militärisches Ehrenmal,” 136.

Volkstrauertag increased after 1959. In 1959, the Volksbund put together a musical and dramatic reading performed by an orchestra and read by four actors. The performance was called *Das Andere*, the text written by Otto-Heinrich Kühner, and accompanying music by Rudolf Oertzen. Historian Alexandra Kaiser detailed and summarized the performance as thus:

The war breaks out of nowhere upon a peace-loving people; the cause and the goal of the violence remains vague. Among the young men, who must march off to war, there is a carpenter (*Der Eine*) and a violinist (*Der Andere*). Both are aware that one of them is going to die and want to know which one: halfway through the piece there is a scene where the two men roll dice to learn their fates. The one who lives will return home and marry the girl. During the battle sequence, the violinist perishes. The carpenter returns to his old life back home and marries. At the end, the mother of the violinist grieves at her son's grave, but Death sees itself cheated because the mother, by remembering and lamenting her son, is contesting Death's right and possession of the dead.²⁸⁹

The theatrical piece depicted fate in war as arbitrary. The Volksbund, especially in this point and still so in later decades, wanted to compel the living to remember the fallen more so than advocate for peace. As Kaiser also argued in her book, "The Volksbund never quite situated themselves behind mobilizing activists for peace as much as against forgetting the war dead."²⁹⁰

Most of the live audience in the German parliament in Bonn gave the performance a positive review. Those who listened to it over the radio, which was a large portion of the West German population, found it melodramatic and tacky. Chancellor Adenauer hated it too, however for different reasons. He disliked what he considered an overt display of pacifism while the federal government was still pushing rearmament and an active West German role in NATO.²⁹¹ That was far from the Volksbund's intentions, but Chancellor Adenauer ensured that was the last year of experimenting with the presentation of *Volkstrauertag*. From this

²⁸⁹ Alexandra Kaiser. *Von Helden und Opfern: Eine Geschichte des Volkstrauertages* (Frankfurt/ New York, 2010), 255.

²⁹⁰ Kaiser, *Von Helden und Opfern*, 256.

²⁹¹ Kaiser, *Von Helden und Opfern*, 260.

point on, the structural form of the ceremony in the German parliament solidified under direct influence of the Adenauer administration, which remained unchanged well into the 21st century. Starting in 1960, *Volkstrauertag* consisted of single or multiple speakers of the *Totenehrung*, a moment of silence, and then the singing of *Lied vom guten Kamaraden*. This structure is lifted directly from the Weimar and Nazi eras. However, the content is what remained flexible, multivocal, and often where the Volksbund exercised more influence. Usually, the Federal President delivered the key address and might be accompanied by other speakers whom the Volksbund invited. President Heinrich Lübke, following Theodor Heuss' pivotal speech from 1952, regularly included and referenced concentration camp dead, and specific victim groups, such as Jews and the disabled. The Volksbund pushed against this by inviting guest speakers who exclusively talked about fallen German soldiers, soldiers of other nations, or national reconciliation.

For the Volksbund, the Soldier's cemetery was the symbol of *Volkstrauertag*. It stood for the memory of fallen soldiers, bombing victims, and expellees in that order. The President of the Volksbund in the 1960s and Lutheran pastor. Walter Trepte called for more "emphasis on our soldiers," and in effect pushed for a hierarchy of remembrance: First, the fallen soldiers of the First and Second World Wars, then other German War dead, finally the fallen soldiers of other nations.²⁹² Thus, what originated after prolonged discussions with representatives of the federal government was a template for the *Totenehrung* portion of the *Volkstrauertag* ceremony. This effort did nothing to solve the issue but gave more reason for efforts in the 1960s to collapse all groups into a single definition of German victimhood. Through this, three processes came to fruition: the *Hilfsstelle für Rasseverfolgte* lobbied for legal equality for the graves of victims killed by the Nazis, and by extension their recognition in the public sphere; the Volksbund wanted to maintain Germany's martial tradition of

²⁹² Kaiser, *Von Helden und Opfern*, 270.

commemoration without having to publicly address issues of guilt and shame; and the federal government wanted a public ceremony of commemoration acceptable both domestically and abroad to boost their legitimacy as the new successor state. All of this came within the context of West Germany's integration into the European Economic community. All of the Volksbund's invited guest speakers of the 1960s were foreign representatives from fellow EEC countries – The Benelux states, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom – who emphasized national reconciliation.

While the conflict around the 1965 war graves law ended with clear political victors,²⁹³ the main *Volkstrauertag* ceremony became a space for competing moral frameworks. Both helped West Germany boost its legitimacy through commemoration. In her study on the development and history of *Volkstrauertag*, Alexandra Kaiser agrees with Jakob Böttcher and Bernd Ulrich in their description of the Volksbund's commemorative interpretation as leveling a differentiation of victims and war dead. During first decades of the post-war era, the primary discursive axes of commemoration were victor/defeated and perpetrator/victim, and these themselves could be plotted on a Honor/dishonor axis, much like Aleida Assmann's depiction in *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*. Both the victors and defeated could be remembered with honor, which both perpetrator and victims could only exist in dishonor. The accomplishment of the state, and to a large extent the Volksbund, was blurring the two axes to create categories such as “soldiers as innocent heroes” and “NS-persecuted as heroic victims.”²⁹⁴ The German language does not lend itself well to differentiating between the Christian *sacrificium* and the more traumatic *victima*. By mixing the two, the Volksbund can provide a meaning-creating perception that can provide sense to senseless death.

²⁹³ Perhaps that is why Walter Trepte congratulated pastor Majer-Leonhard.

²⁹⁴ Kaiser, *Von Helden und Opfern*, 291.

One part of *Volkstrauertag* that the West German public often overlooked was the wreath laying ceremony that follows the main ceremony. The wreath laying, originally at the *Hofgarten des Bundeshauses* and later the Nordfriedhof in Bonn, is a ritual without word, but with martial flare. The Bundeswehr band performs *Lied vom guten Kamaraden* without lyrics, torches are lit, and soldiers in full uniform stand at attention while two soldiers lift a wreath followed by the wreath's patron, usually the German president or a visiting head of state and laid at a central monument explicitly for German war dead. The form of this ritual is the same as during the Weimar and Nazi eras. Hitler performed this exact ritual on *Heldengedenktage* starting in 1933. The context of the era demonstrated the Führer cult, as his advance to the monument focused on him. In the post war era, the interpretation was that the elected official humbles oneself as an act of state grieving in front of the people. The fact that the wreath laying was not televised until the mid-1960s helped minimize associating the ritual with the Nazi era. Towards the end of the negotiations between the Volksbund, churches, and state on *Volkstrauertag* in the early 1952, as the federal government strongarmed the Volksbund into cooperation but still sought their approval, the Volksbund made their final condition for support to keep the space in front of the planned monument open for large ceremonial processions on *Volkstrauertag*.²⁹⁵

What makes this a ritual is its unspoken affirmation of a German martial tradition and heroization of German fallen soldiers. It thus creates a sense of timelessness in its repetition throughout the tumult of Germany's 20th century. It validates the German military of the Federal Republic and provides a sense of equal standing among the nations of the globe, especially considering this is the event usually visited by foreign dignitaries. The ritual also bares striking resemblance to the *Großen Zapfenstreich* marking the end of a chancellor's tenure. This ritual has its roots in the 16th century as a sign for the end of military activities in

²⁹⁵ Ulrich et al., *Volksbund*, 344.

the field and garrison. Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm III instituted the first standardized version of the modern ritual for state events in 1813 with its current form established by 1838. Rows of at-attention soldiers, carrying torches, clad in uniform march to a military band and perform drill like formations for the head of state or observing officials. The Nazis used the ritual extensively during their regime. Viewers of the televised *Großen Zapfenstreich* in 2021 at the end of Angela Merkel’s chancellorship both inside and outside Germany remarked on the eeriness of the ritual’s aesthetic similarity to state rituals under the Nazis. These themselves were a continuity of the Weimar, Imperial, and confederation eras – little different from state rituals in Great Britain, France, and United States that date back to the same eras. Yet, it was exactly such rituals that had been coopted by the Nazis. It reminded people of the Nazis, but only because the Nazis politicized pre-existing rituals.

Conclusion – Cultures of Defeat in Divided Germany

President Heinrich Lübke’s speech at the 1960 *Volkstrauertag* celebration in Bonn garnered much praise as it did criticism. After the controversy surrounding the experimental ceremony in 1959, the 1960 *Volkstrauertag* represented increased state influence on the proceedings. The visiting ambassador from India Badr-ud-Din-Tyabji wrote to President Lübke and praised how he “raised the subject above such petty considerations” and suggested that in the future they should commemorate “all war dead, not specifically German, or any other nationality, but all those who have been the victims of the awful scourge of war.”²⁹⁶ However, much to the dismay of some Volksbund members, veterans, and some other West Germans, President Lübke did not mention the fallen of the First World War in the *Totenehrung* portion of the ceremony, and instead spoke of the terror and crimes of National Socialism, as well as the “calculating opportunism” and “complicity” from broad portions of the German public. One Volksbund member wrote, “It is unfathomable and damaging that in

²⁹⁶ Letter to President Lübke from the Ambassador of India 14.11.1960, B 122/5051.

an event of the Volksbund that a head of state would not think of the dead of the First World War, and instead use his *Totenehrung* as a moral-historical catalogue of sins, predetermining which dead deserve to be remembered.”²⁹⁷ Another woman wrote to President Lübke and exclaimed “[the ceremony] was an insult for our brave German soldiers: Your speech has no understanding of the German heart. Hitler kept Communism out of Europe: The father of Communism is the Jew.” Her letter continued for another page with an Antisemitic diatribe against Germany’s relationship with Israel.²⁹⁸

This disconnect between the private remembrance of citizens and the public narratives of the state parallels Aleida Assmann’s concept of the *Leidgedächtnis der Familien* and the *Schuldgedächtnis* of the state, but both are outcomes of Germany’s culture of defeat and can exist independently of the other – a consequence of multi-vocal commemoration in a democratically mobilized society where some segments express a preference for an authoritarian and racially defined past.²⁹⁹ The 1950s and 60s marked the post-war peak of the Volksbund’s influence on German commemorative culture but the cracks were already showing. The Volksbund’s experience abroad, engaging and negotiating with other national commemorative cultures, made it more sensitive to the feelings of other nations and more confident promoting German-ness abroad. Yet, the government in Bonn began taking another path to remembering and commemorating the circumstances of German defeat by 1965. This contrasted with East Germany, where despite the ever-looming fear of state oppression the importance of the Volksbund and Protestant collaboration gained new meaning expressed through the intense interest of many East Germans. As the Volksbund’s own commemorative approach came under criticism in the West, its interest in the East increased. The project in East Germany was a dedicated effort to save the graves of German soldiers who fell in the

²⁹⁷ BArch B 122/5051.

²⁹⁸ Letter to President Lübke 13.11.1960, BArch B 122/5051, pg 348.

²⁹⁹ Assmann, *Der lange Schatten*, 203.

Second World War. The Volksbund leadership gained the impression through the Berlin Bureau that a good portion of the East German population, albeit privately and quietly, desired the national commemoration they had to offer. The solidifying of separate political and societal structures in East and West Germany, coupled with the fact that Germany remained divided for twenty years after the end of the war, dispelled the hope that this was only a temporary arrangement. Yet, the Volksbund imagined itself as uniting East and West Germans through commemoration of war graves. Moving forward into the years of détente, the Volksbund and the Protestant churches of East Germany soon developed a relationship and structure more suited for permanence than the ad hoc necessity of the first post-war years.

Chapter 4: Memory Wars and *Neue Ostpolitik* 1965-72

By the late 1960s, the Volksbund and its institutional partners, notably the Protestant Church, are forced to confront the major social upheavals of the era: secularization, youth protest, and a strong push to confront the Nazi past. West Germany's first social democratic government comes to power under Chancellor Willi Brandt, which ushered a new era of West German foreign policy known as *Neue Ostpolitik*. The pressure to normalize relations between East and West Germany led to the ouster of Walter Ulbricht as dictator of East Germany, the rise of his successor Erich Honecker, and what seemed to some the solidifying of German division.

The first section presents some of the Volksbund's first efforts to access German war grave sites and reach some rapprochement with the peoples of Eastern Europe. Yugoslavia became the focus of the Volksbund's efforts by the early 1960s due to its position outside Moscow's orbit, and the focus of much of this section. Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr's *Neue Ostpolitik* played a critical part in the Volksbund's ability to achieve recognition from Josip Tito's socialist regime. What Brandt, and in particular Egon Bahr wanted to achieve with their *Neue Ostpolitik* was opening diplomatic, cultural, and economic relations with these three states – and Eastern Europe broadly – while pushing any final resolution to those two questions off to an unspecified, later date. Willy Brandt visited both Moscow and Warsaw – where his famous *Kniefall* at the memorial of the Warsaw ghetto uprising – and signed the resulting treaties of Moscow and Warsaw.³⁰⁰ As “normalization of relations” proceeded between the states of Eastern Europe and West Germany, the Volksbund stood to benefit as well. In a reverse of the Volksbund's activities in Western Europe during the 1950s and early 1960s, where a private organization acted independently through a mandate of the

³⁰⁰ See: Heinrich August Winkler, “The Beginnings of the Brandt Government and the New *Ostpolitik*,” in *Germany: The Long Road West*. Oxford University Press, 2006), 256-265.

West German state, this section contends that Willy Brandt's government saw the Volksbund's efforts as part of *Neue Ostpolitik* and supported the Volksbund's efforts in Eastern Europe.

The second section follows the challenges faced by the Volksbund's project in East Germany. As Erich Honecker succeeded Walter Ulbricht as the SED's uncontested leader, a new era of stabilization came to East Germany. The SED continued rapprochement with religious institutions between 1965 and 1972 as a long-term strategy to undermine them. Marxist ideology believed organized religion would wither away under communism. The strategy divided the Protestant churches between those who continued to support subversive and dissident activity, such as the preservation and commemoration of German war graves, and those who sought to reconcile the church with state socialism. It proved more effective than direct repression. Local and state officials increased the erasure of war grave sites during this period, and the infamous Stasi observed the Volksbund's extensive connections in West Germany and abroad. As normalization of relations between East and West Germany came in the early 1970s, German division also began to look like a more permanent arrangement. This section claims that the Protestant officials running the Volksbund's project, faced with growing pressure from both church and state officials, diverged from the Volksbund's more nationalist approach of commemoration. They adjusted the project to a pacifist and less nationalist form of commemoration to satisfy those within the church to work with state socialism rather than against it.

The final section details the influence of social upheaval on both the Volksbund and its partner, the Lutheran church. The creation of the Great Coalition between the CDU and SPD in 1966 promised a new era of political stability but ended up mobilizing frustrated West German youth to forming the New Left. What began as youth agitation quickly became a mass movement known as "extra parliamentary opposition" by 1968. It believed the social

democrats had abandoned their leftist principles and were collaborating with what it perceived as a new fascist threat. Given this context, West Germans who marched in these student and youth demonstrations also called for more critical engagement of Germany's Nazi past. They challenged the role of traditional institutions, such as the established churches, had in West German society. The Volksbund, reliant on youth participation, quickly found out that they were not spared its ire. They were perceived as an aging and conservative institution that "commanded mourning."³⁰¹ This section argues that the rise of the West German protest movement and youth voices critical of West German society empowered small, reform-oriented minorities within conservative organizations such as the Lutheran church and the Volksbund to attempt to align their organizations with a more secular and liberalizing society. Both attempts were successful in moving Lutheran and Volksbund leadership towards reform. Yet, the goal of expanding to their membership bases – in the Volksbund's case beyond veterans – remained a more challenging and elusive goal.

Opening the Door to the East - Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia was the first state in Southeastern Europe that showed early promise for the Volksbund. The foreign office in Bonn estimated that 113,000 graves were scattered across Yugoslavia with about 73,000 identities and their locations already known due to war time Wehrmacht files.³⁰² On the recommendation of the ÖSK, the Austrian Black Cross, the Volksbund's *Referat Ost* reached out to the Office for the Protection of Monuments in the Republic of Slovenia (*zavod za spomeniško LRS*) in Ljubljana in December 1960. A reply came the following March, and the office in Ljubljana accepted the request to receive delegates of the Volksbund. The fact that the Yugoslav officials even replied was likely because the letters exchanged only addressed the question of the German war graves 1914-

³⁰¹ "Letter from the Jungsozialisten of Mölln to President Heinemann, 08.10.1971, BArch B 122/8158, pg 40.

³⁰² Report of the Foreign Office March 1973 "Zur Frage der deutschen Kriegsgräber in Jugoslawien," BArch B 136/5068, pg 1.

18. *Referat Ost* made the recommendation to its delegates that if “there is a possibility of including the German war graves of 1939-45 in the discussion due to a Yugoslav initiative or the favorable situation (ie. when inspecting graves of World War I and World War II together), the delegation is entitled to make use of it.”³⁰³ Yugoslavia was not aligned with the Soviet Union but requesting access to the graves of “Fascist invaders” in Marshall Josip Tito’s socialist state may have been too risky.

The Volksbund attempted to circumvent the Yugoslav federation capital in Belgrade out of fear that any progress might get held up in bureaucratic captivity or meeting ideological resistance, which was its recent experience in Poland. Both the Volksbund leadership and *Referat Ost* believed that working at the republic level, starting in Slovenia was the most auspicious location to start. On one hand, the Volksbund officials reasoned that they could more easily access the gravesites and steer discussions away from politics and diplomatic quid pro quos and towards the “practical work” of accessing and the securing the physical existence of German war graves in the republic. On the other hand, Slovenia had traditionally been more culturally aligned with Habsburg Austria, and German speaking culture in general. Many Slovenians knew German, which removed the risk factor of mistranslation and promised some level of cultural connection. In addition, the Volksbund wanted to maintain its image as a private organization and did not seek assistance from the Foreign Office.

Volksbund delegates Seifert and Ludolph crossed into Yugoslavia via Italy on April 19, 1961, and planned to stay until the 23rd. They intended to visit four sites related to the First World War guided by two officials from the monument’s protection office in Ljubljana, the director Mr. Turnher and a woman named Dr. Pisternik. On the first day, director Turnher guided the two men to their first location outside Ljubljana, a small town called Skofja Loka.

³⁰³ “Referat Ost des VDKs Anweisung 04.04.1961,“ N 24/181.

They first visited a confectioner's shop whose owner was a former front-line soldier in both World War I and World War II. The confectioner, a Slovene fluent in German with Habsburg loyalties, looked after the Austro/German military cemetery in Skofja Loka, first created after the First World War. The confectioner explained that the municipality of Skofja Loka intended to construct a road across the grounds of the Austrian military cemetery soon, but no decision had been made yet. Then the confectioner moved closer to Seifert and Ludolph and whispered, so that director Turnher could not hear. As if he had divined the real reason the Volksbund delegates came to his shop that day, the confectioner explained that "the unmarked German dead of World War II should lie outside the Skofja Loka Municipal Cemetery by the cemetery wall."³⁰⁴ The two understood by the confectioner's behavior around director Turnher, likely suspicious of a Yugoslav government official as a former German collaborator, that they should not bring up "problems related to the Second World War deliberately at this time."³⁰⁵

When they came to the location of the cemetery in Skofja Loka, the delegates noted that in the event of a possible road construction through the cemetery, a proper reburial of each individual remains could be guaranteed.³⁰⁶ The state of this cemetery was a relief for the men. Perhaps the tens of thousands of graves scattered across Yugoslavia were not as lost as the Volksbund had feared. The two delegates explained in their report, "after the war, all grave markers and memorials were removed from the military cemeteries set up by the German side, if only because of their National Socialist symbolism. Even in terms of their surface area, they hardly remained untouched. There was frequent repurposing and

³⁰⁴ "Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961," N 24/181, pg. 4.

³⁰⁵ "Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961," N 24/181, pg. 4.

³⁰⁶ "Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961," N 24/181, pg. 4.

misuse.”³⁰⁷ They added in a separate note “in Belgrade part of the burial ground is used as a camping site, in other places the burial grounds are used by the army as a storage area.”³⁰⁸ In a later conversation, director Turnher admitted that he feared that there may have been nothing left for him to show the delegates and that they may leave Slovenia “disappointed.”³⁰⁹ This apparent sympathy for the Volksbund’s work endeared Turnher to the delegates so much so that he would be recruited as a Volksbund contact in the republic of Slovenia.

The next excursion for the Volksbund was less cordial. On the 21st, the other Slovenian official, Dr. Pisternik guided the two delegates to the city of Maribor - formerly a German speaking town called Marburg where most German speakers had been expelled. On the way they passed a village where Dr. Pisternik drew attention to a war time atrocity where one hundred male residents were hung from trees by Germans – apparently in response to partisans shooting a local collaborator. Dr. Pisternik then spent more than an hour talking about her experiences in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Perhaps sensing their discomfort and silence on the topic, she concluded with the fact that she “also saw German families suffer” and added, “unfortunately, at the end of the war there were also attacks by Slovenian partisans in Austria, even though the number of victims was no more than five hundred.”³¹⁰ The story of the one hundred executed Slovenians could be seen as an intimidation tactic, perhaps make the two men feel guilty or at least to make them feel unwelcomed in the area. Being that Maribor and the surrounding area once had a sizeable pre-war German speaking population, this might have been a way to justify the expulsions

³⁰⁷ Foreign Office report March 1973, “Zur Frage der deutschen Kriegsgräber in Jugoslawien,” BArch B 136/5068, pg 116.

³⁰⁸ Foreign Office report March 1973, “Zur Frage der deutschen Kriegsgräber in Jugoslawien,” BArch B 136/5068, pg 116.

³⁰⁹ “Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961,” N 24/181, pg. 4.

³¹⁰ “Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961,” N 24/181, pg. 7.

and perhaps warn the men about what they were to see and experience. Seifert and Ludolph did not include what or if they said anything to these topics in their report, giving the impression that Dr. Pisternik did much of the talking. Dr. Pisternik's final comments, especially after talking about her time in the concentration system, demonstrated perhaps two thoughts. She may have felt she had overstated her attempt to guilt them and expressed some sympathy for Germans who had suffered. She was in Ravensbrück and stated that she had known German inmates. At the same time, she mentioned that Slovenian partisans "killed no more than five hundred" Germans - Austrians included – inferring it was not enough to make up for what the Germans had done. Or she was just making conversation since they were driving to a graveyard with dead from the Second World War. Either way, the conversation left an impression on the men enough to include it in their report and to be brought up by the executive committee later. The inclusion of Pisternik's conversation may have served to demonstrate to the committee that some individuals who suffered at the hands of German occupiers may still be willing to work with the Volksbund given the specifics of their experience.

When they arrived in Maribor, Dr. Pisternik brought them to the curator of a local history museum for information on German First World War graves in the area. The curator argued that he could not give out such information and suggested they call the cemetery director of Maribor. After the call, Dr. Pisternik shared that the cemetery director "could not give any information about war graves, that we should instead contact the Maribor police."³¹¹ After they drove to the police, Dr. Pisternik entered the office alone to obtain permission for their visit to the cemetery. After about fifteen minutes, Dr. Pisternik returned – quite agitated – and explained that if they "want to visit the cemetery, they require an authorization from

³¹¹ Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961, " N 24/181, pg, 7.

the State Secretariat for Foreign Affairs in Belgrade.”³¹² Apparently, a letter had come three days ago stating that foreigners should not be given any information about foreign soldiers' graves. Dr. Pisternek insisted on going to go to the Maribor cemetery anyway, but the two men advised against this.³¹³ They left Maribor without success.

The police in Maribor had likely called Turnher in Ljubljana at some point to remind him of Belgrade's policy. The next day, director Turnher received the two delegates in his office “in an at first friendly manner.”³¹⁴ However, as the men described in the report, “his expression was not so free and very soon he confessed that there were great concerns.”³¹⁵ Turnher expressed, “somewhat tormented,” that they had now gained some insight into the conditions in various military cemeteries in Slovenia, but now there was not much else they could do. He added that the problems of the German war graves in Yugoslavia were a foreign matter and Belgrade alone was responsible for that, namely the State Secretariat for Foreign Affairs. His office only had the task of preserving cultural monuments, and this area of responsibility only includes the preservation of the German memorial in Tolmin, erected after the First World War. The individual republics in Yugoslavia had a relatively independent position, but this did not apply to foreign affairs, railways, post, and other federation wide concerns, for which Belgrade alone was responsible. Director Turnher therefore recommended that the Volksbund submit a request to the State Secretariat for Foreign Affairs in Belgrade.³¹⁶ This was the very step the Volksbund wanted to avoid doing.

³¹² Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961, “ N 24/181, pg. 7.

³¹³ Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961, “ N 24/181, pg. 7.

³¹⁴ Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961, “ N 24/181, pg. 10.

³¹⁵ Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961, “ N 24/181, pg. 10.

³¹⁶ Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961, “ N 24/181, pg. 10.

Later that day, Dr. Pisternik accompanied Seifert and Ludolph to the city cemetery of Ljubljana. Here a “very friendly, German-speaking employee of the cemetery administration” took them to the two cemeteries of World War II and to the Austrian ossuary for the fallen of World War I.³¹⁷ The men described in their report that the burial ground contained both German and Italian dead.”³¹⁸ This fact especially impressed the delegates and later the Volksbund executive board who feared the worst concerning the state of German graves in the East. They also, like Friedrich Hossbach, tended to dismiss the “Communist Slavs of the East” as not being cultured enough or too ideological to take an interest in the care for war graves in general. The delegates described the cemetery administrator as “a good Slovene and businessman,” who volunteered to “get the money for the care of the German soldier’s graves and care for them.”³¹⁹ This description presented the cemetery director as pragmatic, less ideological, and perhaps even an anti-Communist – a potential Volksbund ally.

The results of the Yugoslav trip were mixed. The Volksbund’s executive board were surprised by the warm reception by Slovene officials. Dr. Pisternik, a Yugoslav state official who suffered persecution under the Nazis in the concentration camp system and knew well of the crimes committed against Slovenians by German occupiers, could also be counted on as a contact, guide, and even advocate when dealing with other Yugoslav institutions, such as the police. Even in areas where they are neglected, if the graves are still intact and documented, the Volksbund could still restore them. On this point, however, there was little optimism. Friedrich Hossbach described it pessimistically, “I have the impression that much was undertaken, but little achieved.” Yet, even he was amazed by the effort Dr. Pisternik and Director Turnher in Ljubljana and the interest of some individuals, such as the confectioner in

³¹⁷ Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961,“ N 24/181, pg, 11.

³¹⁸ Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961,“ N 24/181, pg, 11.

³¹⁹ Bericht über die Dienstreise der Herren Seifert und Ludolph nach Jugoslawien 19.-23.04.1961,“ N 24/181, pg, 11.

Skofja Loka, in privately caring for the Austrian and German war graves. Hossbach insisted that contacts with private individuals and local or regional offices would yield more progress, but the Yugoslavian central government in Belgrade had other plans.³²⁰

Perhaps because of the Volksbund's visit and the agitation it may have caused some Yugoslav officials, Josip Tito centralized responsibility for all war graves in Yugoslavia by the end of 1961. The new law placed the responsibility for the care of all war graves in the territory of Yugoslavia, and the graves of Yugoslavians fallen in war abroad, under the authority of the Secretariat of the Executive Committee for Social and Communal Issues in Belgrade. It also established a clear hierarchy of the graves that are to receive protection and care: First, the graves of Yugoslavian soldiers, POWs, and victims of "hostile acts of violence" from the Second World War and previous wars; second, graves of Yugoslavian soldiers, POWs, and victims of "hostile acts of violence abroad" from the Second World War and previous wars; third, graves of the allied armies in Yugoslavia from the Second World War and previous wars; and Fourth, "graves of foreign armies or bands who fought against the common enemy in the Second World War."³²¹ Fallen Wehrmacht soldiers were to be excluded from this hierarchy altogether, still considered the "common enemy of all peoples" for committing widespread atrocities.

The main motivation of the law was to create a common Yugoslav commemorative narrative at the national level. Leaving commemoration to the regions could lead to the memorialization of German collaborators who fought against the Red Army and perpetrators of inter-ethnic violence, such as the leaders of local nationalist militias like Croatian Ustašes and Serb Chetniks. The memories of these local heroes and perpetrators of interethnic violence had to be suppressed in favor of a common Yugoslav narrative of resistance against

³²⁰ "Stichwort-Protokoll, Besprechung über Ost-Fragen 08.05.1961," BArch N 24.181, pg 10.

³²¹ "Gesetz über die Soldatenkriegsgräber in Jugoslawien," BArch N 24.195.

German and Italian fascism.³²² The actions and attitudes of the Slovenes from the Ludolph and Seiphert's trip confirmed these concerns of Yugoslav authorities in Belgrade. From the limited view of the Volksbund, this was an attempt to threaten the continued existence of German war graves in Yugoslavia with oblivion through targeted neglect. Regardless of Belgrade's true intent behind the new law, the Volksbund knew that the Foreign Office in Bonn had to take a more active role in negotiating with Belgrade directly.

In 1964, Yugoslavia escalated the war graves discussion further. A Yugoslavian delegation made it clear to its interlocutors in Bonn that "any discussion of the care of German war graves in Yugoslavia will be coupled with reparations negotiations."³²³ Bonn rejected this notion immediately. West Germany had dodged the issue with its own Western ally Greece. From the perspective of Bonn, West Germany had already paid reparations through the dismantling of German industries and redistribution under the auspice of the Inter-Allied Reparations Agency (IARA), completed by 1953. The loss of Germany's eastern provinces and the division into East and West also served as a punishment, and in a sense a reparation to Poland and the Soviet Bloc as a whole. In 1960, West Germany had paid 115 million DM to Greek individuals who had suffered directly from German occupation, and Yugoslavia received around 36 million dollars in equipment distributed through the IARA and 8 million marks went to Yugoslav citizens subjected to forced labor.³²⁴ However, both Greece and Yugoslavia considered these paltry sums compared to the destruction of their infrastructure, the loss of life, and the general suffering inflicted on their peoples.³²⁵

³²² See: Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force*, (Cornell University Press, 2016).

³²³ Letter from Volksbund representative in the federal government Dr. Fülleln to CDU MP Dr. Maria Probst, 21.08.1964, BArch NL 1219/359.

³²⁴ Yugoslavia requested 2 billion DM from West Germany in reparations. Belgrade renewed its demand for German reparations in the early 1990s, but soon collapsed with the dissolution of the Yugoslav state. See: S. Djordjevic, "Claims of Yugoslavia Against Germany on the Grounds of War Damages After World War Two, *Annals of the Faculty of Law in Belgrade*, Vol. 6, Belgrade, 1994, 606-615.

³²⁵ Greek demands for greater reparations continued well into the 21st century.

Following this demand, the Foreign Office in Bonn no longer discussed the war graves issue with the Yugoslav delegation, but rather advised Belgrade to work with the Volksbund – a private organization that would be incapable of making such arrangements for West Germany. Diplomatic relations between Bonn and Belgrade essentially ceased due to the war reparations issue until 1968. Belgrade allowed Volksbund delegates to travel to sites within its territory periodically and meet with officials at the republic and municipal level. Yet, Tito's government continued to block sharing any information on the buried individuals and direct Volksbund access and work at these sites.³²⁶ In a letter to Chancellor Willi Brandt in 1972, the new Volksbund president Willi Thiele shared that the Volksbund considered negotiations with Yugoslavia to still be at a "standstill" due to the demand for reparations.³²⁷

The election of Willy Brandt to the West-German Chancellorship in 1969 brought a critical shift to West Germany's engagement with Eastern Europe. The two biggest issues driving Cold War tensions were German division and Poland's new border with East Germany at the Oder-Neisse line. The pursuit of full diplomatic recognition by the three states directly involved in these questions – East Germany, Poland, the Soviet Union – would have required West Germany to officially recognize both German division and the Oder-Neisse line. Few West Germans would have supported such a move, including Brandt and his diplomatic team. What Brandt, and in particular Egon Bahr wanted to achieve was opening diplomatic, cultural, and economic relations with these three states – and Eastern Europe

³²⁶ By the early 1970s, the Volksbund and the Foreign Office viewed their relationship with their Yugoslavian contacts quite positively and talked quite regularly and openly. Ljubljana and Zagreb were the typical destinations, with only one trip each to Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Skopje, showing the Volksbund's continued preference for working with Slovenes and Croats, two peoples with traditionally closer cultural ties to Germany and Austria. However, a 1973 report from Foreign Office revealed that as a consequence of these friendly relationships, Belgrade relocated its files related to the German war dead to its own security services, likely as a precaution from unauthorized sharing among officials in constant contact with the Volksbund or Foreign Office in Bonn. Marshall Josip Tito likely wanted to save these files as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the FRG; "Zu den Fragen der Deutschen Kriegsgräber in Jugoslawien, Kassel 03.1973," BArch B 136/5068.

³²⁷ Letter to Chief of the Office of the Chancellery in Bonn, Minister Horst Ehmke from Volksbund president Willie Thiele, 01.12.1972, BArch B 136/5068.

broadly – while pushing any final resolution to those two questions off to an unspecified, later date. Egon Bahr, as head of the Foreign Office, was in a position to speak to his counterparts in Moscow directly and offered a promise to eventually settle the two questions in vague language that satisfied Soviet Foreign minister Andrei Gromyko. Willy Brandt then followed up with visits to Moscow and Warsaw – where his famous *Kniefall* at the memorial of the Warsaw ghetto uprising – and signed the resulting treaties of Moscow and Warsaw. Brandt and Bahr expected the most opposition from East Germany, and so saved that diplomatic effort for after “normalization of relations” with the Soviet Union and Poland. They hoped that would put pressure on the East German state to pursue a similar treaty agreement as those reached in Moscow and Warsaw.³²⁸ As tensions began to ease between the states of Eastern Europe and West Germany, the Volksbund stood to benefit as well.

In addition, Willi Thiele’s election as the first social democratic President of the Volksbund in 1970 proved auspicious in eventually breaking the deadlock in the East over the war graves question. Brandt’s policy of *Neue Ostpolitik* helped move negotiations forward concerning the identification, protection, and preservation of German war graves abroad. Both chancellor Brandt and Thiele understood the two as interconnected. In a letter to Chancellor Brandt in March 1973 on the eve of a new round of diplomatic visits to Eastern European capitals, President Thiele asked Brandt “to commemorate the German war dead by laying a wreath during your stay in Belgrade.”³²⁹ Thiele explained, “in my opinion, the laying of a wreath in one of these cemeteries would not only have a great response among the public in the Federal Republic and emphasize the German interest in the hitherto unresolved question of war graves towards the Yugoslav side.”³³⁰ Thiele went on to ask Brandt to press

³²⁸ See: Heinrich August Winkler, “The Beginnings of the Brandt Government and the New *Ostpolitik*,” in *Germany: The Long Road West*. Oxford University Press, 2006), 256-265.

³²⁹ Letter from President Thiele to Chancellor Brandt, March 6, 1973, BArch B 136/5068, pg 113.

³³⁰ Letter from President Thiele to Chancellor Brandt, March 6, 1973, BArch B 136/5068, pg 113.

for access to German grave sites on behalf of the Volksbund in his negotiations with Marshall Tito.³³¹

Chancellor Brandt responded positively to the idea using reconciliation over the graves as “bridge of understanding between peoples”³³² However, rejected Thiele’s proposed wreath laying citing that it was “more important to discuss the future care of war graves with the Yugoslav government,” and “avoid bringing attention to questions about the past publicly when we want to look to the future.”³³³ It is interesting to consider that Brandt rejected a ritual act in line with his famous 1970 wreath laying and kneeling before the Warsaw Ghetto uprising monument in Poland. Thiele likely suggested a repeat in Belgrade because of the attention in garnered for calls of reconciliation. Yet, there are some considerable differences to bring into focus. These talks were about breaking through the deadlock surrounding reparations, which Brandt, like Thiele saw as tied to the care of German war dead. Brandt considered any ritual act of state consecrating the dead, whether German or Yugoslav, would only intensify Yugoslavian passions to press for reparations.

Still, Brandt kept his promise to bring the issue of war graves up with Tito during his visit in mid-April 1973. Brandt succeeded in shifting the conversation away from the past and reparations to the present and future through favorable economic relationships between West Germany and Yugoslavia, which included offering extended loans of up to 300 million dollars and boosting German tourism to the Adriatic.³³⁴ Yugoslavia experienced increased economic growth through the late 1960s and early 1970s, which made closer relations between Belgrade and Bonn more desirable. Getting Yugoslavia to set aside its reparation demands would also set a model for how West Germany could improve its relations with

³³¹ Letter from President Thiele to Chancellor Brandt, March 6, 1973, BArch B 136/5068, pg 114.

³³² Letter from Chancellor Brandt to President Thiele, June, BArch B 136/5068, pg 147.

³³³ Letter from Chancellor Brandt to President Thiele, June, BArch B 136/5068, pg 147.

³³⁴ David Binder, “Tito and Brandt Announce War-Reparations Accord,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/04/20/archives/tito-and-brandt-announce-warreparations-accord-leaders-talks.html>.

other Eastern European states. The press and diplomatic releases at the time of Brandt's visit to Belgrade did not mention the role of the German war graves question, nor have any studies on the Volksbund and West German diplomacy since then.³³⁵ This is the first study that addresses the Volksbund's role in West German *Neue Ostpolitik*, or the larger connection between West German diplomacy and the millions of scattered German war graves across Europe.

Chancellor Brandt wrote to President Thiele in June 1973 stating that "the issue of the maintenance of German war graves was discussed at various levels during my visit to Yugoslavia, including with the future Yugoslav ambassador in Bonn, Mr. [Budimir] Lončar. From the talks we got the impression that we can expect progress in the foreseeable future, although not immediately."³³⁶ For the first time since the end of the Second World War, the prospect of the Volksbund finally working in Eastern Europe seemed within reach. The Volksbund now hoped that the easing of tensions between East and West would lead to breakthroughs with Poland and the Soviet Union where they estimated remains of over two million Germans who perished in the field or in captivity, rested.

³³⁵ Both recent works on the Volksbund treat the whole post-1945 periods as final chapters, and completely omit the close relationship between West German foreign policy and the German war graves question. See: Böttcher, J., Hettling, M., & Nolte, P. *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag und gesellschaftlicher Trägerschaft: eine Geschichte der Kriegsgräberfürsorge in Deutschland im 20. Jahrhundert*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 2018; Ulrich, Bernd, Christian Fuhrmeister, Manfred Hettling, and Wolfgang Kruse. *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Entwicklungslinien und Probleme*. Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2019; Major works on West German diplomacy also omit the relationship between the German war graves question and foreign policy. See: Eder, Jacob S. *Holocaust Angst: The Federal Republic of Germany and American Holocaust Memory Since the 1970s*. Oxford University Press, 2016; Gray, William Glenn. *Germany's Cold War: The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949-1969*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003; Sheffer, Edith. *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain*. Reprint edition. Oxford University Press, 2014; Conze, Eckart, Norbert Frei und Peter Hayes. *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit: Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik*. München: 2010; Winkler, Heinrich August. *Germany: The Long Road West*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

³³⁶ Letter from Chancellor Brandt to President Thiele, June BArch B 136/5068, pg 147.

The Struggle Against Grave Erasure in East Germany

The year 1965 marked twenty years since the end of the Second World War. For the work of the clandestine Volksbund and Protestant joint project to register and protect the German war graves of East Germany, this meant that the twenty-year *Ruhefriste*, or resting periods for the graves of many East German communities were now expiring. If town or district officials came across any war graves on communal lands, registered or unregistered, that did not have direct relatives requesting an extension on the waiting period, the grave could be erased. This might mean the grave marker or the remains themselves could be removed and disposed, or simply leveled (*eingeebnet*), by flattening the soil and removing any markers in order to erase any physical signs of a grave without removing the remains. This latter method was the easiest, cheapest, and therefore the most common. The space could be reused for more recent remains, if on a communal burial ground, or any purpose local officials saw fit, from recreational parks, to forestry, to agriculture. Halting, stalling, or mitigating this process now became the dominate focus for the Berlin Bureau and the *Vertrauenspfarrer*.³³⁷

The new leader of the Berlin Bureau Dr. Nora Noth, officially replacing Gertrud Martens-Heidborn on January 1, 1965, quickly made intervention against grave erasures the

³³⁷ It should also be noted that there was also a two-decade struggle between the Jewish community of East Berlin and the SED to save the Jewish cemetery Weißensee, one of the largest Jewish cemeteries to have survived the Second World War. Located on valuable urban space, the SED in East Berlin attempted numerous times between 1965 and 1977 to erase the cemetery and make room for Socialist urban planning. There is so far no documented evidence of the Berlin Bureau providing any support to save Weißensee; "Grabpflege jüdischer Gräber, Weißensee," BArch DO 4/894; After intense petitioning from *Adass Jisroel* members in East Berlin, Israel, and the United States the SED granted the cemetery protective status as a "cultural heritage site in 1977." *Adass Jisroel*, or the Israelite Synagogue community of Berlin first founded in 1869 and later destroyed by the Nazis, reformed itself in East Berlin in 1986 and made rebuilding and refurbishing Weißensee its top priority. *Aktion Sühnezeichen* assisted in the reconstruction efforts. Erich Honecker became personally involved in the project in preparation for the 750th anniversary of Berlin in 1987, funneling state funds into the project after the SED recently changed its policies towards Israel and the East German Jewish community. "Rechtsstatus Synagogengemeinde Adass Jisroel Berlin (AJB) Berlin-Weißensee," BArch DO 4/2696. See also: Britta Wauer, Amélie Loisier. *Der Jüdische Friedhof Weißensee: Momente der Geschichte* (be.bra, Berlin, 2010).

top priority. She sent a circular to all regional churches and parish offices requesting them to protect all German war graves from erasure. Nora Noth emphasized that “soldier’s graves should remain an impressive memorial for peace” and that the erasure should only take place if reburial elsewhere was intended.³³⁸

Nora Noth soon encountered another problem: less willingness among pastors to commit to caring for the German war graves. Few pastors responded to the request positively and some pastors even contemplated erasing German war graves on church property. Dr. Noth sent out another circular reminding the church leadership that war graves in church cemeteries did not have a waiting period and should not be levelled.³³⁹ The fact she had to send it at all demonstrated how much support for the war graves project had fallen in recent years. In response, rather than building a national culture of commemoration in continuity with the past, which the Volksbund was doing in West Germany despite gradual modifications under political pressure, Dr. Noth and the *Vertrauenspfarrer* attempted the purpose of preserving and memorializing German war around pacifism – specifically, framing the war graves as warnings for future generations against armed conflict, especially in the era of nuclear proliferation. This strategy better aligned their work more with the peace movements of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe - a key component in building a larger international community among formerly adversarial nations. A shift to a more overt peace narrative was an important concession to socialist ideology at the time. This however did not remove the national aspect of memorializing German war graves from the conversations and correspondence between the Berlin Bureau, Lutherans officials, and various interlocutors. The SED-regime’s persistent neglect of German war graves and willingness to care for the

³³⁸ Letter from Leader of the Berlin Bureau Nora Noth to High Consistory Behm, 12.01.1965, EZA 104/1221.

³³⁹ “Rundschreiben an die leitenden Verwaltungsbehörden der Gliedkirchen in der DDR, 22.01.1965,“ EZA 104/1221.

graves of other nationalities, even those from the West, made it impossible to remove nationality completely from the discussion.

At the 1965 meeting of the *Vertrauenspfarrer* on April 11, now held in the Lutheran Church's Department of Graves Care (*Abteilung Gräberfürsorge*) on Auguststraße in East Berlin, the Berlin Bureau staff focused on building support for its work within the regional churches. The pastors recognized an occasional willingness among communal offices to work with them, but they all agreed that it was becoming more difficult to work with some parish offices than GDR officials. In cases where the erasure of graves was unavoidable, they suggested the construction of common graves in or at least a common monument preserving the identity of the deceased in "a worthy form."³⁴⁰ The *Vertrauenspfarrer* also recommended that their numbers be increased to cover more areas, especially in the Oder region, and to instruct other church officials that their work is not just a hobby, but "an expression of pastoral care in line with their duties to God, the evangelical church, and their parishioners."³⁴¹

More and more, typically younger pastors did not share this sentiment especially to the care of German war graves from the Second World War. Pastor Günter Pilz from Mittelherwigsdorf in Saxony wrote the High Chancery in East-Berlin and complained:

I do not understand this regulation. There is an extensive war cemetery here, which has been leveled and locked for years. I think this measure is the only right one. Many years ago, we abolished the different classes for funerals of the deceased because we wanted to reflect the realization that all people are equal in death. We cannot see who each individual is before God. Why should the war dead suddenly be dealt with differently than with all those who died a normal death during the war years and whose graves are of course leveled if no one takes care of them or the redemption period has expired? Do we have a moral obligation towards these dead, which we must take into account through special grave care? Do we have any right at all to divert money and resources

³⁴⁰ "Vermerk über die Sitzung der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 04.11.1965," EZA 110/115.

³⁴¹ "Vermerk über die Sitzung der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 04.11.1965," EZA 110/115.

we lack from other church work and use it for this purpose? Is not here the place to obey the word of Jesus: Let the dead bury their dead?³⁴²

The pastor's argument demonstrated the growing attempt to reconcile the church with socialism. His argument stood in line with the socialist sepulcher approach to memorializing the dead, where the deceased regardless of class, are cremated, placed in a common urn, and their name recorded on a single communal monument.³⁴³ The SED supported this method to gradually replace traditional burials and grave monuments. It also reflected the growing desire among some members of the church to accept the SED's position in society, and rather than constantly living at odds with state socialism, attempt to bring the church into the fold. Continuing to honor the dead of the last war, whom the SED consider to be "Fascist war dead" or "losers duped by a false political ideology," only hindered present and future cooperation with the state.

The SED's new strategy of infiltrating the Protestant church with state supporters and dividing it against itself seemed bearing fruit and had direct consequences for German war graves. One *Vertrauenspfarrer*, for example, reported on the community of Paplitz, just a few kilometers southwest of Berlin. He noted "here in the old cemetery surrounding the church, there were more than 50 German soldiers in unfortunately not very well-kept graves...it is shameful for a member of the church that the church community, including its pastor, hardly takes care of the graves."³⁴⁴ In another nearby village Schlepzig, the same pastor stated "the worst situation is in the church cemetery. Here the mass graves of about fifty soldiers and refugees, including women, are laid out on the western edge of the cemetery, but only a

³⁴² "Brief an die EKD Kirchenkanzlei für die Gliedkirchen in der DDR von Evangelisch-Lutherisches Landeskirchenamt Sachsen, Betr. Kriegsgräberfelder von kirchlichen und kommunalen Friedhöfen, Bezug Dortiges Rundschreiben vom 22.01.1965," EZA 104/1221.

³⁴³ Detailed in Monica Black's 2010 study *Death in Berlin: From Weimar to Divided Germany*

³⁴⁴ "Bericht über die Besichtigung von Gräbern von Gefallenen auf verschiedenen Kirchlichen und kommunalen Friedhöfen, 22.01.1965," EZA 104/1221.

rotten wooden cross still indicates that these poor people found their last shelter here. The whole thing makes a devastating impression of lovelessness.”³⁴⁵

The district capital city of Schwerin provided a larger scale example of this attempt to erase German war graves at this time. Most urban centers of East Germany had removed war graves and nationalist monuments from prominent memorial spaces during allied occupation. Schwerin was an exception. The city and its surrounding suburbs had approximately 5400 scattered mass graves from the nearby concentration camp Wöbbelin (located just to the south) civilians killed in air raids, and Wehrmacht soldiers from the city’s field hospital – all from the final days of the war. The first category made up most of the graves. The Wöbbelin camp was a transit stop for the forced marches from Neuengamme and Sachsenhausen on the way to Lübeck on the Baltic coast in April and early May 1945. Thousands died or were murdered in and around Schwerin. While under initial American occupation, the city interred dead from the forced marches and from camp Wöbbelin in mass graves on former green spaces in the city. Its suburbs were where individual graves of Wehrmacht dead and bombing raid victims had been buried. To emphasize which dead deserved to be remembered under the SED, the city passed the following ordinance based on a publication of the Institute for Municipal Economy in November 1965: “In this list of orders are to be included according to the decision or instruction of the council; Graves of honorary burghers, deserving citizens, graves of victims of fascism and citizens of other nations lying in the communal cemeteries. In accordance with the importance of these tombs, care must be provided.”³⁴⁶ The hierarchy of war dead is comparable to the Yugoslav law passed in 1961, and to other socialist states. Wehrmacht soldiers, expellees, and even victims of the allied bombings were missing from the list, paving the way for official erasure. In 1966, the city leveled these graves –

³⁴⁵ “Bericht über die Besichtigung von Gräbern von Gefallenen auf verschiedenen Kirchlichen und kommunalen Friedhöfen, 22.01.1965,” EZA 104/1221.

³⁴⁶ “Abschrift – Oberkirchenrat Schwerin Betr: Kriegsgräberfelder von kirchlichen und kommunalen Friedhöfen 12.11.1965,” EZA 104/1221.

approximated to be in the hundreds - and in this case there was no room for negotiation with the *Vertrauenspfarrer*.

In the rural areas of East Germany, often only elderly individuals or some families made the effort to care for the scattered graves. In the small village of Märkisch-Buchholz, south of Berlin, another pastor wrote “there are a number of soldiers' graves, all of which are well cared for, since individual families in the community each have one or two graves in their care. But this very individual care makes the complex uneven, the generous investment and, above all, a common memorial or cross are missing.”³⁴⁷ Throughout the existence of the East Germany, the *Vertrauenspfarrer* often reported individual or small collections of scattered war graves being cared for by unidentified locals. Collectively, they contributed to ensuring these graves did not fall into oblivion through neglect or state led erasure. To some degree, this was a small act of defiance against the socialist state. Like the East German Protestant churches and the Volksbund, these unknown individuals possibly believed it was a cultural and historical duty to preserve these graves for future generations. These East German individuals acted independently, intervening to save the graves they knew the state would not. But personal or ethical reasons could also have been primary motivations not to be overlooked. Perhaps some of these unknown individuals had a loved one killed or reported missing, and their remains were never recovered, and this work gave them some solace. In this largely under-reported and documented phenomenon, personal and political motives cannot be clearly separated.

In the 1968 meeting, the pastors also discussed how to best counter the tendency on communal and some church cemeteries to level the war graves section and place a single monument. They concluded that if this happens despite the protest and efforts of a

³⁴⁷ “Bericht über die Besichtigung von Gräbern von Gefallenen auf verschiedenen Kirchlichen und kommunalen Friedhöfen, 22.01.1965,“ EZA 104/1221.

Vertrauenspfarrer, their next objective was to preserve the names of the graves that were levelled.³⁴⁸ This came up in relation to a case in the town of Schwedt in October, 1967 where the city council planned to remove the graves of Wehrmacht soldiers who died in the town field hospital in 1945, and dispose of their remains in an undisclosed location by May 1968. *Vertrauenspfarrer* Riedel wrote the Church Chancery in Berlin stating “we do not have the right to make demands, since the municipal cemetery does not belong to us. In October we will probably have a meeting with the city council, where we could present our wishes.”³⁴⁹ Pastor Riedel made his case successfully, citing the internationally recognized law to secure the permanent right to rest for war dead, and convinced the city council to at least move the remains to a new location outside the city for reburial rather than disposal.³⁵⁰ This instance served as a positive example of what the *Vertrauenspfarrer* could do when war graves on communal lands were threatened. Recording and preserving the identities of the war graves, especially those threatened or already leveled gradually became the main strategy now for the *Vertrauenspfarrer* in East Germany.³⁵¹

Time and twenty years of state-socialism worked against cultivating a religious-nationalist memorialization project with widespread support. But this also related to broader changes to the role of the church in secularizing communities across Europe. The late 1960s was a period of upheaval around the role of the church in the Western world. Increasing government influence on the lives of its citizens, coupled with counter-cultural movements continued to replace its influence in communities, especially among the younger, post-war generation. This transition also encouraged the *Vertrauenspfarrer* to define their work in

³⁴⁸ “Vermerk über die Konferenz der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 25.01.1968,” EZA 110/115.

³⁴⁹ Letter from Pastor Riedel to the Chancery of the EKD in Berlin, 26.10.1967, EZA 104.1221.

³⁵⁰ “Abschrift“ forwarded to the EKD Chancery in Berlin by Ms. Lorenz of the Berlin Bureau, 03.11.1967, EZA 104.1221.

³⁵¹ “Vermerk über die Konferenz der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 23.01.1969,” EZA 110/115.

spiritual terms rather than political ones to help recover declining rates of support - even though political considerations could never be completely absent from the care of German war graves.³⁵²

By the 1970s, communication between the Protestant churches in East Germany and the Volksbund via the Berlin Bureau in West Berlin became more difficult. Fewer and more infrequent instructions and personnel could travel from Kassel to West Berlin, and then into East Germany. More responsibilities shifted to the Lutheran Graves Care department in East Berlin and made more decisions independent of the Volksbund headquarters in Kassel. The Volksbund reduced the Berlin Bureau to just a communication node with the Lutheran church of West Berlin, ran only by Dr. Nora Noth. Responsibilities shifted from the female led Berlin Bureau to the more male dominated Graves Care department, further symbolizing the shift from the unofficial/covert work of women to institutionalization of men. But this was far from the end of female participation in the care of German war graves in East Germany. Many of the church employees working for the Graves Care department were women, as well as later *Vertrauenspfarrer* of the 1980s, such as Ernst Teichmann's successor, pastor Erdmute Labes at the military cemetery in Halbe, and pastor Beatrix Zastrow from Leipzig.

Important structural changes continued with the creation of the *Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR* (Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR) or BEK in June 1969. The institutional separation of the Protestant churches in East Germany from the Protestant churches in the West did not cease interchurch communication, but it decreased significantly. Dr. Nora Noth noted this during her biannual visit to the Lutheran Graves Care department on Auguststraße, East Berlin in November 1970. She explained that the basic function of the Berlin Bureau was "to inform the relatives in the territory of the

³⁵² Letter to High Consistory Behm from unknown (name illegible, likely a *Vertrauenspfarrer*) 22.08.1969, EZA 104/1221, D39-40.

GDR about the work of the Volksbund,” which required a constant exchange of letters, and “over the last few months this has become impossible because the letters have stopped arriving.”³⁵³ The War Graves Department on Auguststraße became the new destination for East-West correspondence concerning the Volksbund and the care of war graves in East Germany.³⁵⁴ The Volksbund approved and finalized these changes by October 1971.³⁵⁵

Willi Brandt’s *Neue Ostpolitik* soon influenced the SED’s view towards the care of foreign war graves on East German territory. Following the treaties of Moscow and Warsaw in which West Germany recognized borders in Eastern Europe where they stood and the Basic treaty with East Germany in 1972, SED officials became interested in war graves and their diplomatic value. As *détente* improved relations between Eastern and Western Europe, state officials expected more requests for missing loved ones to come through official channels. One Lutheran official at the Department of War Graves reported a surprise visit from an official of the East German Interior Ministry. The asked if there had been any requests from citizens in West Germany in the last two years about information regarding known and unknown war graves in East Germany. The Lutheran official answered immediately that he did not know personally but promised to make church records available for state review as soon as possible.³⁵⁶

High Consistory Hans-Jürgen Behm, now the *de facto* leader of the Volksbund’s project in East Germany as head of the War Graves Department, updated the *Vertrauenspfarrer* on this situation at the annual meeting in February 1972. Behm explained that the state had intensified its efforts to report the number of graves of foreign victims. He

³⁵³ “Vermerk 25.11.1970” forwarded to the Chancery of the EKD Berlin from the Lutheran Church Office 27.11.1970, EZA 4/1545.

³⁵⁴ “Vermerk 25.11.1970” forwarded to the Chancery of the EKD Berlin from the Lutheran Church Office 27.11.1970, EZA 4/1545.

³⁵⁵ “Vermerk über die Besprechung für die Weiterarbeit der Abt. Gräberfürsorge am 28.10.1971,“ EZA 110/1.

³⁵⁶ Letter to Dr. Nora Noth from unknown (likely someone from Abt. GF in Ostberlin), 16.11.71, EZA 110/1.

also claimed that the state was “doing this very bureaucratically without regard to reporting existing mistakes, such as state officials reporting those who are dead to be still missing and vice versa to families and officials abroad.”³⁵⁷ The Interior Ministry expected the Graves Care department to assist in this process. The *Vertrauenspfarrer* expressed the hope that this would change policy to allow grave visitation outside East Germany but did not have high expectations. One pastor reported that, while the SED was refocusing its efforts on preserving foreign war graves on East German territory, the village of Niesky in Saxony erased the German war graves in its communal cemetery without taking the steps to preserve their identities, claiming a lack of space as the reason.³⁵⁸ Once again, the state policy of erasing German war graves and local customs worked in tandem.

Now that *détente* had reached East Germany, the SED wanted to demonstrate that it had kept track of and protected the war dead originating from Western states. Communal cemeteries often held the remains of Italian, French, or Dutch forced laborers, or even a few Anglo and American pilots, and demonstrated more willingness to preserve these graves. Some communities even extended the *Ruhefriste* without having received requests from families or their respective states. At this moment, the state had to rely on the illegal work of the Protestant church for the last twenty years to prove that it had been adhering to the Geneva conventions that whole time. The Italian government was especially keen on repatriating these remains, many of whom were concentration camp victims or forced laborers, and the SED-regime put a lot of effort into fulfilling these requests after 1970.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁷ “Vermerk über die Jahreskonferenz der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 10.02.1972,“ EZA 110/115.

³⁵⁸ “Vermerk über die Jahreskonferenz der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 10.02.1972,“ EZA 110/115.

³⁵⁹ “Brief des Sekretariats des BEKs an die leitenden Verwaltungsbehörden der Gliedkirchen, Berlin den 28.12.1971, betr. Gräberfürsorge ausländischer Kriegstote, Bezug: Unser Schreiben vom 26.11.1971,“ EZA 110/1.

This process also involved the infamous *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, MfS or “Stasi.” The Stasi collected the information from church and communal files listing the locations, names if known, nationality, and whether they were part of “criminal organizations” such as the SS, Gestapo, and “other criminal fascist organizations.”³⁶⁰ West Germany was absent from this list, and no numbers existed in the Stasi records for German war dead on East German territory, indicating continual resistance within the East German government in bringing war dead into inter-German politics. Surprisingly, only in 1969 did the Stasi begin to investigate the activities of the Volksbund in West Germany, its connection to subversive commemorative activities in East Germany, and its role abroad. On January 13, *Hauptabteilung XVIII* (Main Department XVIII), responsible for surveilling foreign trade, science and technology, and the defense industry, as well as countering foreign intelligence services, sent an internal inquiry to *Hauptabteilung XX* (Main Department XX) to “check what facts and information you have about this organization and inform us of the result.”³⁶¹ The inquiry specifically wanted department XX to investigate three questions regarding the Volksbund: “Is it true that this organization is subordinate to the West German Ministry of War? To what extent is this organization linked to employees of Western secret services and other enemy organizations? What role does this organization play in the context of Bonn's *Ostpolitik*?”³⁶²

³⁶⁰ Austria, the Netherlands, and Belgium are noted as having the most in this latter category. Interestingly, there is no indication from these files that Stasi knowledge of a person’s participation in the SS, Gestapo, or other fascist organizations precluded the transfer of their remains to their home country, where they possibly could be commemorated. Perhaps the SED and Stasi preferred such remains be removed from Socialist territory. “Zusammenstellung Kriegsgräber aus nichtsozialistischen Staaten,” BArch MfS ZAIG 30350.

³⁶¹ This Stasi division was one of the most critical sections in its surveillance apparatus. It monitored important parts of the GDR state apparatus such as the judiciary and health care system, the block parties and mass organizations, the cultural and sports sectors, the media and the churches, SED special party operations, and was responsible to counter underground political activity within the GDR; “Organisation der Kriegsgräberfürsorge in Westdeutschland, 13.01.1969,” BArch MfS HA XX-AKG 840.

³⁶² “Organisation der Kriegsgräberfürsorge in Westdeutschland, 13.01.1969,” BArch MfS HA XX-AKG 840.

Department XVIII likely came across the Volksbund since the organization often promoted service in the West German *Bundeswehr* among the German youth and had frequent correspondence with the Defense ministry in Bonn as a result. The *Bundeswehr* often collaborated with the Volksbund in its donation drives and youth programs by providing logistical support. The Stasi may have realized that the Volksbund was quite active across Western Europe, in correspondence with foreign government officials – including those in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union by this point-, church leaders, and NGOs, and realized the wider scope of its work. In addition, the files of the early years under the Ulbricht administration revealed the Volksbund’s earlier designation from the highest office in East Germany as a “fascist, revanchist, and militarist” organization.” Why the Stasi only in 1969 decided to investigate the Volksbund’s activity and in connection with Bonn’s *Ostpolitik*, despite clandestinely working with the churches in East Germany since 1948 and the SED fully aware of the Berlin Bureau in West Berlin and the Lutheran Department of Graves Care in East Berlin since the mid-1950s, remains a mystery.

One could speculate that the Stasi simply never judged this a significant issue. The Stasi never seemed concerned about the Volksbund’s connection to the Lutheran Church, its Department of Graves Care, or even the Berlin Bureau in West Berlin. Yet, from its totalizing perspective, anything outside the narrowly defined worldview of State Socialism was potentially subversive, and therefore a threat, no matter how innocuous. The MfS existed arguably as an entity independent of the SED-state and embodied the Stalinist model of totalitarianism even more so. Therefore, it is even more surprising that the Stasi took an interest in investigating the Volksbund so late and did not connect it to its wider infiltration and surveillance of the church in East Germany. Stasi files revealed persistent surveillance of Volksbund activities well up to 1989, even connecting it with wreath laying ceremonies at the

military cemetery in Halbe by the *Ständige Vertretung der BRD* (Permanent Representation of the FRG) or *StäV* after 1972.³⁶³

The reason for sudden Stasi interest in 1969 is a little clearer. In 1967, Secretary General of the SED Walter Ulbricht proclaimed that his party achieved a model of State Socialism on par with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. An internal power struggle erupted as he lost favor in Moscow and East Berlin for fear of challenging Soviet leadership among Warsaw Pact nations. This led to his replacement in 1971 by Erich Honecker, a close friend of Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev. At the same time, Bonn's pursuit of *Ostpolitik* with the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact nations raised questions of the West's intent at a moment of internal instability and strife. Willy Brandt took office in the fall of 1969 after the election in September, but already at the beginning of the year his platform of détente had clear goals communicated to the West German public and was gaining support. The Stasi likely perceived Bonn's *Neue Ostpolitik* as a Trojan horse of sorts, offering détente as a subterfuge to push subversive policies to undermine the Soviet system at a moment of internal disunity in the SED and the Warsaw pact. The Volksbund became caught up in these considerations due to their close connections with the Bonn government, particularly the Ministry of Defense. The Stasi monitored the Volksbund and its activities but did not take any known action against the organization, even as Volksbund delegates began speaking with officials from their fellow socialist allies in the last two decades of the Cold War.

³⁶³ "Tätigkeiten des VDKs in den 80ern, Rede von BK Kohl zum 70. Jahrestag des VDKs," MfS ZAIG / 28234; "Abschrift über ein Gespräch zwischen VDK Präsidenten Hans-Otto Weber und Botschafter der DDR in Bonn Ewald Moldt," BArch, MfS, HA VII, nr. 5130.

A New Path for the Volksbund? Commemoration during West German Social Upheaval

Pastor Christian Rietschel's proposed guidelines for the church-based memorialization of the war dead from 1954 in East Germany caused much more controversy in West Germany. Most church officials consented to creating a singular set of guidelines for all member churches to follow, but which war dead was to receive more recognition remained in question.³⁶⁴ The theological support given to past German militarisms was literally set in stone in many Lutheran churches of Germany, which made some post war pastors push reform. One official who responded to the survey wrote about the consecration of a memorial in a church in Ahlem, near Hannover, which had the John 15:13 inscription "Greater love has no one than giving his life for his friends." The official complained that "it really should not be possible to use this Scripture in such a context, because it is a blatant abuse...the expectation that our fellow officials will make theologically responsible decisions on such issues is apparently too high."³⁶⁵ The pastor believed that too many pastors and parishes clung to militarist values of the recent past.³⁶⁶

This growing intellectual and theological resistance towards military commemoration within the church, a centuries old tradition across Europe and especially Germany, soon grew into a direct challenge. In January 1967, a meeting of the pastorate in Flensburg took place to discuss a planned memorial service for the 100th anniversary of the 86th Fusilier Regiment "Queen Augusta Victoria," named after the wife of Kaiser Wilhelm II. This local unit had fought in the Austro-Prussian and Franco-Prussian wars, served overseas in the German

³⁶⁴ "Rundschreiben an die Leitungen der deutschen evang. Landeskirchen von EKD Kirchenkanzlei Hannover D. Brunotte den 10.11.1955, betr. Richtlinien für die Einweihung von Kriegerdenkmälern, Bezug Unser Rundschreiben vom 19.09.1955," EZA 2/3561.

³⁶⁵ "Brief von OKR Dr. Niemeier an OKR Marenholz Hannover Landeskirchenamt den 10.09.1957," EZA 2/3561.

³⁶⁶ "Brief von Ev. Luth Landeskirchenamt München an alle Ev. Luth Dekanate den 23.08.1963, betr. Gefallenehrung am Volkstrauertag in Gotteshäusern," EZA 2/3561.

colony of German Southwest Africa, participated in the genocide of the Herero and Nama people of present-day Namibia, and fought in the First World War before its dissolution. The veterans also wanted the church council to install a commemorative plaque in memory of those who died in the Herero uprising of 1904/06 in the colony of German Southwest Africa as well as a plaque from the Franco-Prussian War 1870/71. These plaques would be an addition to the name plaques of Flensburg citizens that fell in the First and Second World Wars. Provost Wilhelm Knuth of the Lutheran church in Flensburg refused to hold the requested memorial service in St. Marien's church. The church board denied the request to install additional memorial plaques citing that the church interior had traditionally never housed such memorials for these other conflicts and the 86th Fusiliers until that moment never expressed an interest in this form of memorialization. The Lutheran church in Flensburg also considered removing additional overt memorials to militarism from church grounds, angering the veterans further.³⁶⁷

Thus started a public struggle over memory, Germany's military tradition, theology, and the role of the church and military in interpreting their role in West Germany. While interviewing the Lutheran consistory in Hannover about the growing controversy, the Lutheran press service from Bielefeld added this interpreted the veterans' intent behind the multiple memorial requests as an attempt to present "an unbroken tradition of German soldiering from 1870/71 to 1904/06, 1914/18, the Reichswehr and Wehrmacht to the Bundeswehr."³⁶⁸ The press service perceived this as an attempt by the veterans to immortalize their place in German history at a time when many Germans were questioning

³⁶⁷ "Bericht des Ev. Pressedienst Zentralredaktion, Bielefeld den 10.03.1967, betr. Material zu dem in Flensburg ausgelösten Meinungsstreit," EZA 2/3564.

³⁶⁸ "Bericht des Ev. Pressedienst Zentralredaktion, Bielefeld den 10.03.1967, betr. Material zu dem in Flensburg ausgelösten Meinungsstreit," EZA 2/3564.

the role of the military in society and, more relevant for the veterans, reevaluating the recent martial past of Germany in light of the crimes of the Second World War.³⁶⁹

These early statements from within the Lutheran church gave the pastors in Flensburg the impression that the church leadership supported their decision. Three Lutheran pastors from Flensburg, Dr. Krause, Friedrichs, und Jastram not only defended the decision of the St. Marien church but advocated for an even more radical position. They presented their theological arguments in five theses, which were published in local newspapers and Church publications of Schleswig-Holstein. Their five theses can be summarized as follows:

1. Church buildings have the sole purpose of giving space to the congregation gathered around the word and sacrament. Anything that does not serve this purpose in terms of furnishings and design must be removed if it serves or promotes other purposes.
2. The atonement that Jesus Christ brought about in dying for sinners and commanded to proclaim precludes for the believer a distinction between war death and ordinary death. The sacrifice of life for others cannot justify one before God.
3. God will call the dead to His judgment. That is why one will find nothing but dust and ashes in the graves and urns, and nothing at all in the memorials that are supposed to replace graves.
4. The peace of God and reconciliation between people are only communicated through the living word in the sermon. Symbols convey none of this because they are mute and put up with every interpretation.
5. Because the people of God live in all nations, the church has the mandate to work for peace and reconciliation among peoples. It is therefore contrary to its mission if it makes room in its meeting rooms for places of honor to commemorate national disputes.³⁷⁰

The first thesis was less controversial and served mainly to justify the following four. Theses two through five all served one purpose - to finally sever the Lutheran church from the propagation of German nationalism and glorification military death on theological and moral grounds. These statements were not controversial for the majority of West Germans, already skeptical of the church since the World Wars, both of which the Lutheran church provided

³⁶⁹ Not to mention the role of the 86 Fusiliers in a colonial genocide, but this was not recognized nor discussed during this era.

³⁷⁰ "Bericht des Ev. Pressedienst Zentralredaktion, Bielefeld den 10.03.1967, betr. Material zu dem in Flensburg ausgelösten Meinungsstreit," EZA 2/3564.

considerable moral support for the respective German war time regimes – the Kaiser and the Nazis. These were far more controversial for conservative nationalists like the veterans, and as the pastors soon learned, much of the older Lutheran theologians and church leadership who still had considerable influence over the post war Lutheran church.

The pastors attempted to rally their parishioners behind their suggested changes. In February 1967, the three pastors held a series of sermons during Sunday and special mid-week services, providing further defense and explanation of their positions. It is important to keep in mind that most regular church goers by the 1960s in West Germany were conservative, with most liberals having long since stopped attending. One pastor exclaimed: “We should do away with such blasphemous atrocities radically, even at the risk that perhaps faithful, old members of the church will take offense at it. This is a necessary impetus!”³⁷¹

The final pastor concluded the series of sermons with perhaps the most radical of conclusions. He not only argued to remove all military memorials from the church, but also against the very practice of public memorialization.

Such memorial sites serve less to commemorate the dead than to remind people of the atrocities of war... They literally say nothing! In any case, I would dare to give a militaristic speech on the war at the most peaceful of all conceivable peace memorials, without the memorial interfering in any way. That is why we do not need such stone reminders, and least of all in a church where week after week in sermons and prayers guilt and forgiveness and peace are clearly audible and hopefully also concrete.³⁷²

One may initially link this theological shift to the turbulent politicization of the 1960s. Yet more likely, this was a return centuries old doctrine from ascetic monastic orders of medieval Europe where devout Christians separated the struggles of the material world from declarations of faith alone. For the pastors of Flensburg, this was a restoration of a more traditional Christian doctrine before the church’s union with German nationalism and

³⁷¹ “Bericht über einen Streit und dessen Folgen, Vortrag im Gemeindehaus St. Marien am Montag, den 27.02.1967,“ EZA 2/3565, pg 1.

³⁷² “Die Ehrenhalle in St. Marien: Bericht über einen Streit und dessen Folgen, Vortrag im Gemeindehaus St. Marien am Montag, den 27.02.1967,“ EZA 2/3565, pg 8.

militarism. From a lay perspective, especially the politically conservative, these views were quite radical.

The theological positions of these “Flensburger pastors,” as the press labeled them, garnered both the attention and outrage of many who voiced their opinions publicly. One was the leader of the 86th Fusilier’s veterans’ organization, a member of the former German nobility, Prince Friedrich Ferdinand of Schleswig-Holstein Glücksburg. Friedrich Ferdinand was born in 1913 and was barely six when the new Weimar constitution removed his family’s legal rank, title, and noble privileges. He joined an illegal, right-wing paramilitary organization known as the *Schwarze Reichswehr* in 1932, dedicated to the violent overthrow of Germany’s nascent democracy. He was a vocal supporter of the Nazis, and his family’s former nobility bought him quick advancement in the officer corps of the Wehrmacht before and during the Second World War. Friedrich Ferdinand continued to use his title of “prince” as part of his public persona, common even today among German families of former nobility. Ferdinand claimed in his opinion piece published in *Die Welt* in May 1967, that these sermons were proof that the pastors sought to remove the existing Lists of honor, Name plates, and the sarcophagus of a fallen soldier. “In a relapse into anarchic early Christianity, many pastors, including the three Flensburg brothers in office, fully, consciously, and consistently stand up for holy zealotism beyond state ties.”³⁷³ Friedrich Ferdinand believed that the Lutheran church’s traditional role as a state supported institution obliged it to continue its support of German nationalism. He then added, these “pastors are not serving that power of love but are contributing to the destruction of the church and the norms of human fellowship.”³⁷⁴

³⁷³ “Gefallenenehrung nicht in der Kirche?” – in *Die Welt* Nr. 53 03.03.1967.“ EZA 2/3564.

³⁷⁴ “Gefallenenehrung nicht in der Kirche?” – in *Die Welt* Nr. 53 03.03.1967.“ EZA 2/3564.

Friedrich Ferdinand's op-ed circulated in larger West German print news such as *Die Welt* and rallied West Germany's veterans' associations against the Lutheran pastors of Flensburg. The veteran right-wing periodical *Der Stahlhelm* published in its March/April 1967 publication an anonymously written defense of the German military's continued privileged position in public commemoration in West Germany. It argued, "death from the effects of war has nothing to do with Christian love [the Flensburger pastors] argue, and yet it says in the Holy Scriptures John 15:13: Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his brothers. In pictures and parables, Jesus Christ speaks of existence in the hereafter after death, and in Flensburg they say that the memory of our dead is unchristian." The veterans then rejected the notion that nationalism is at odds with Christian teachings, proclaiming, "Christianity is supranational, they preach, but forget that the individual Christian is born into his nation. From the apostles of the Old Testament to Paul we always see a national attitude, and especially in Martin Luther!³⁷⁵"

Martin Luther's five-hundred-year-old shadow was tough for most Lutheran pastors to escape. Fifteen Pastors in Schleswig-Holstein composed and signed a response condemning the three pastors and stated that the policy of the church was only "to ensure overtly nationalist and revanchist memorials are not installed in churches."³⁷⁶ Remembrance of the dead, whether served in the military or not, was to remain a primary role for the church. They wanted pastoral care to take precedence over esoteric, theological arguments. German Admiral Helmut Neuß in Kiel praised the condemnation of these pastors and characterized

³⁷⁵ Die Westmark, Mitteilungsblatt der Traditionsgemeinschaft „Der Stahlhelm B.d.F. v. 1918“ e.V. März/ April 1967, „Die Pastoren von St. Marien in Flensburg Entgegnung und Richtigstellung, EZA 2/3564, pg 7.

³⁷⁶ Bericht des Ev. Pressedienst Zentralredaktion, Bielefeld den 10.03.1967, betr. Material zu dem in Flensburg ausgelösten Meinungsstreit,“ EZA 2/3564.

the three Flensburger pastors therefore as “unchristian” and “being possessed by zealotry and intolerance.”³⁷⁷

More influential members of the Lutheran church began to turn their back on the pastors of Flensburg. Six theology professors from the University of Kiel weighed in on the controversy and condemned the position of the three pastors. They issued a joint statement in June 1967 connecting the Flensburger pastors with “secularization, modern nihilism and skepticism.”³⁷⁸ The theologians blamed post-war liberalism for the diminished role the Christian faith seemed to have in the daily lives of West Germans. They went even further and claimed that to be anti-militarist was to be against the very idea of resurrection of the soul after death. The theologians viewed the Flensburger pastors as harmful contributors to the downfall of the Christianity rather than reformists attempting to reconcile faith with the changing views of many West Germans on Germany’s past and military tradition. Local media outlets in Flensburg reported on the perspectives of the Flensburger pastors, but larger German and even global media outlets elevated the sensationalized outrage of veterans, military leaders, and theologians against the Flensburger pastors. The *New York Times* even carried the story in March 1967 mistakenly referring to the controversy as “already won by the pastors of Flensburg.”³⁷⁹

Meanwhile, other leaders of the Lutheran church and the Volksbund kept quiet during the whole affair. The High Consistory of Hannover wrote to a colleague in March advising him “to be careful” because “not everything that has been reported in the press has been

³⁷⁷ “Bericht des Ev. Pressedienst Zentralredaktion, Bielefeld den 10.03.1967, betr. Material zu dem in Flensburg ausgelösten Meinungsstreit,” EZA 2/3564.

³⁷⁸ “*Kirchliche Stimmen* Nr. 5/67, Stellungnahme zu den Flensburger Thesen Meinungsäußerung Kieler Theologieprofessoren den 03.06.1967,” EZA 2/3564.

³⁷⁹ “3 German Clerics Win Fight Against a War Memorial,” *New York Times*, March 19, 1967, <https://www.nytimes.com/1967/03/19/archives/3-german-clerics-win-fight-against-a-war-memorial.html>.

accurate or true.”³⁸⁰ The High Consistory insisted that the Flensburger Pastors were not against the memorialization of war dead, despite their own statements to the contrary, but the way it had been done in the past, and only wished that the glorification of war be kept out of the church. The High Consistory agreed with this sentiment and that those fallen in combat were to be remembered, but alongside civilians killed in air raids, the fallen soldiers on other side, and victims of the concentration camps. The High Consistory ended his letter explaining that the church board in Flensburg had in the meantime come up with a solution that would “cause some annoyance but is suitable.”³⁸¹

1. The hall of honor in the St. Mary’s was to remain as it was
2. The monument to the resting soldier will be removed from the memorial and placed elsewhere
3. The tablets with the names of the fallen will remain in the hall of honor.³⁸²

This settlement was essentially the status quo before the 86th Fusiliers submitted their additional requests. It was a victory for the Lutheran church in Flensburg in a sense, but far from the greater goals of the three pastors, and even farther from the way it was portrayed in the media. More importantly, it demonstrated how volatile the commemoration of war dead had become, and how close many circles of the Lutheran church were tied to the national conservatism of veterans and the West German armed forces.

The controversy in Flensburg also reinforced a major post-war historical trend of Germany’s protestant churches confronting its complicity in Germany’s dark past. Matthew Hockenos’ 2004 book *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* presented the reasons why the post-war Lutheran church struggled more than the Catholics to retain churchgoers after 1945. Hockenos argued that the inclination to avoid an aggressive

³⁸⁰ “Brief von OKR Dr. Niemeier an Alexander Catterfeld, den 12.05.1967, betr. Flensburger Vorgänge, Bezug: Dortiges Schreiben vom 25.03.1967,“ EZA 2/3565.

³⁸¹ “Brief von OKR Dr. Niemeier an Alexander Catterfeld, den 12.05.1967, betr. Flensburger Vorgänge, Bezug: Dortiges Schreiben vom 25.03.1967,“ EZA 2/3565.

³⁸² “Brief an OKR Dr. Niemeier Kirchenkanzlei der EKD von Alexander Catterfeld, Lüneberg den 20.05.1967, betr. Kriegerdenkmäler in Flensburger Kirchen, Ihr Schreiben vom 12.05.1967,“ EZA 2/3565

confrontation with the Nazi past was stronger among Protestant Church leaders than the drive to reform the church's ecclesiastical structure, theology, and political practice. The refusal by the conservative majority to draw any practical lessons from the church's complicity with National Socialism only further placated an already unapologetic German population.³⁸³ Hockenos' observation was demonstrated clearly in the case of the controversy in Flensburg. Much of the Lutheran leadership chose to remain quiet or loudly denounced the reform minded pastors while providing moral support to unapologetic former Nazis in the public sphere. Even though membership in the Lutheran church had already declined by the mid-1960s and more critical voices about Germany's past entered the public sphere, the persistence of this national conservatism in West Germany should not be overlooked.

The Volksbund held a critical position at this moment as the linchpin between veterans' interests, the established churches, and the West German state. However, like the Lutheran consistory in Hannover, the Volksbund also chose to remain quiet about Flensburg. Even within the organization, internal communication only mentioned that the executive board in Kassel were watching it unfold with interest. The Volksbund leadership wanted to avoid damaging its relationship with both the Lutheran church and veteran organizations, both of whom they depended on for support.³⁸⁴

A secondary source on the matter was a PhD candidate named Geert Demarest from the Freie Universität of Berlin. He was working on his dissertation on the Volksbund's contribution to Franco-German reconciliation through its youth programs in the early 1970s. Demarest discussed the Volksbund's post-war relationship with the Lutheran Church as a brief sidenote in his dissertation and depicted it as positive, mentioning only two examples of disagreement - the date of *Volkstrauertag* and the construction of war memorials in churches.

³⁸³ Matthew D. Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past*, (Indiana University Press, 2004), 14.

³⁸⁴ "VDK Landesverband Berlin, Niederschrift über die Vorstandssitzung des Landesverbandes Berlin am 22.03.1967," DAB 1.7-133-1.

On these issues, Demarest opined in favor of the Volksbund and did not present much of the details in these controversies, instead asserting that these were cases where the pastors were ignorant of the Volksbund's work. Demarest cited interviews with members of the Volksbund executive board in 1972 and claimed the board members vehemently opposed the pastors and the Lutheran consistory's solution to the controversy in Flensburg.³⁸⁵

Again, similar to the Protestant churches of West Germany, not all Volksbund members or regional branches were resistant to an evolving commemorative approach. The leader of the Volksbund branch in West-Berlin, Martens, and possibly the second husband of Gertrud Martens-Heidborn of the Berlin Bureau, often pursued projects the executive board in Kassel and other branches refused to take on. Martens wrote to Catholic Prelate Georg Puchowski in West Berlin in May 1963 and explained that there has been a lively debate within the Volksbund over the efforts of Nazi victim organizations to grant state protection for the graves of those persecuted and murdered by Nazis. Martens predicted correctly that the parliament in Bonn would soon weigh in on this issue, which it did through the passage of the 1965 War Graves law. Martens recalled a conversation with the leader of *Aktion Sühnezeichen* (Action Atonement) or ASZ in Berlin, Pastor Hans-Richard Nevermann. The two men discussed the differences between their organizations and their own personal views overlapped.³⁸⁶ Martens did not speak for the Volksbund, but agreed with pastor Nevermann that the Volksbund needed a fundamental change to its commemorative approach.

By the mid-1960s, the ASZ was expanding its own projects, limited as they were in funding and personnel, to sites in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and Israel. A French official from Lyon, France named Rene Kahn wrote to the new leader of ASZ, pastor Franz von Hammerstein in December 1965 offering a potential project considering the new War

³⁸⁵ Geert Demarest, "Die Arbeit des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Ein Beispiel für die Praxis der deutsch-französischen Aussöhnung 1945-1975," Diss. FU Berlin, 1977.

³⁸⁶ "Brief vom Vorsitzende Martens des VDK Landesverbandes Berlin an Puchowski, den 28.05.1963," DAB I/7-133-1.

Graves Law in West Germany. Kahn explained that a cemetery in La Boisse near Lyon contained 1185 dead that were either strewn haphazardly over a large area and neglected or in mass graves. Many were German Jewish hostages who were captured in France and murdered by the Gestapo. This site stood in contrast to the German soldier cemetery only 500 meters away, well maintained and in good condition thanks to the Volksbund. Kahn indicated that he found the policy in this case a bit tricky but pointed out that under the new West German War Graves law, which went into effect on January 7, 1965, victims of Nazi persecution and violence outside of Germany may fall under its protection. Many of the remains in La Boisse were of German citizens killed for their Jewishness. The status of these graves under the War Graves law was too murky for immediate support from Bonn. Kahn claimed that so far, the government in Bonn had not made any funds available for this cemetery and argued that the ASZ should seek out the Volksbund and work with survivors, victims' organizations, and Jewish confessional groups to protect this and similar sites.³⁸⁷

The ASZ contact in the Catholic Church, Prelate Puchowski, wrote to the President of the Volksbund Walter Trepte, a Lutheran pastor himself, to help gain Volksbund support. Puchowski addressed him as pastor instead president in the letter, likely to appeal to him as a fellow Christian and theologian. Puchowski explained that due to the main location of ASZ being in Berlin and its modest means, the issue regarding the cemetery of primarily German Jewish victims in France was funding and hiring personnel. Puchowski argued that this would be a meaningful task for the Volksbund and would do much for German reputation abroad. He also argued that only the Volksbund, a private organization, can cut through the bureaucratic red tape and care for this cemetery which lies so close to one already in the

³⁸⁷ "Brief von Rene Kahn (Villeurbane, Rhone, Frankreich) an Aktion Sühnezeichen Pfarrer Dr. Franz v. Hammerstein, den 13.12.1965, betr. Ihr Schreiben vom 01.12.65," DAB 1.7-133-1.

Volksbund's care. Prelate Puchowski shared that ASZ leader pastor Franz von Hammerstein accumulated 200,000 DM in donations for the project and needed primarily logistical help.³⁸⁸

Unfortunately, the letter did not engender the desired result. A Protocol of the West Berlin branch of the Volksbund on April 5, 1966, revealed that the leadership in Kassel, including Walter Trepte, argued the law of 1965 was only in reference to the graves of victims on German soil, and the Volksbund's purpose abroad was to care for German military cemeteries. Martens' Volksbund branch in West Berlin, however, ignored the decision in Kassel and decided to work with the ASZ, "as they had the same goals at heart."³⁸⁹ Due to the Volksbund's federated structure, Martens could pursue projects independent of Kassel so long as his branch was self-funded. His branch's limited funds and labor, along with the ASZ's collected funds managed build the initial basis for the project.³⁹⁰

Martens launched a campaign for additional support for the project in La Boisse. In December 1968, Martens reported that there was general support to care for these graves, but he remained pessimistic about winning any from the rest of the Volksbund.³⁹¹ Several months prior, he had received letters from members of other regional branches of the Volksbund claiming their planned work at La Boisse was "against its statutes."³⁹² Martens clarified that his interpretation was supported by the "spirit" of the 1965 war graves law even if the language was vague. Martens argued that the Volksbund needed to revise its own ordinances to take a clear position on the care of graves of victims of the Nazi regime despite the vagaries of the 1965 law. He warned, "the suspicion that we wanted to leave back doors open (escape clauses) does more damage to the reputation of the Volksbund than the disapproval

³⁸⁸ "Brief an Herrn Pfarrer Dr. Walter Trepte im VDK von Prälat Puchowski, den 31.01.1966, betr. Aktion Sühnezeichen," DAB 1.7-133-1.

³⁸⁹ Protocol of the session of the Volksbund regional Berlin West board, 15.04.66," DAB 1.7-133-1.

³⁹⁰ Protocol of the session of the Volksbund regional Berlin West board, 15.04.66," DAB 1.7-133-1.

³⁹¹ "Brief an Prälat Dr. Albs von Vorsitzende des VDKs Landesverband Berlin (West) Martens, den 10.12.1968," DAB 1.7-133-1.

³⁹² "Brief an Prälat Dr. Albs von Vorsitzende des VDKs Landesverband Berlin (West) Martens, den 10.12.1968," DAB 1.7-133-1.

of an ever-narrowing circle of those who do not want to be reminded of the violent [Nazi] regime.”³⁹³ Martens and the Volksbund in West-Berlin organized two trips to La Boisse in June and December 1969, each with thirty participants, a mix of grave specialists and youth volunteers, to help provide proper graves to the victims of La Boisse and “create a worthy cemetery.”³⁹⁴

Martens was ahead of the curve in terms of pushing the Volksbund towards projects aligned with the changing political views of the late 1960s. The Volksbund started to encounter more public criticism and reluctance to join among the younger, post-war generation. Regional and executive board members were quick to see that this threatened the future of their organization as the World War-era generations aged. The topic was the main subject during a lengthy session of the executive board on April 5, 1968. A prepared statement called “*Die Geistigen Grundlagen des Volksbundes*” (The Spiritual Foundations of the Volksbund) was read aloud to the members to provide a starting point to discuss a new direction for the Volksbund. It opened, claiming:

A certain mental restlessness, especially among the younger generation, and especially among the academic youth, has been occupying the German public for some time. The questioning of traditional values and models, the criticism of the dominant factors that set the tone in our society, the so-called establishment, are not just, as is often claimed, statements by a small radical minority of our youth, but are obviously symptoms of a widespread discomfort. This discomfort is felt in the Volksbund - as the mixed response to its events in the public shows - increasingly towards its work...In order to be able to answer a critic satisfactorily, the Volksbund needs a clear, renewed self-understanding, not only at the top of the association, but above all where the Volksbund has direct contact with the population and solicits their cooperation.³⁹⁵

The meeting represented a rare moment of self-reflection and recognition for the executive board on the broader societal changes in West Germany and where the Volksbund would fit

³⁹³ “Brief an den Vorsitzenden der Satzungs-Kommission des VDKs vom Vorsitzenden des Landesverbandes Berlin (West) Martens, den 26.11.1968,“ DAB 1.7-133-1.

³⁹⁴ BArch BW 1/53003.

³⁹⁵ “Sitzung des Präsidiums am 05.04.1968, Kassel, betr. Die Geistigen Grundlagen des Volksbundes,“ DAB 1.7-133-1, pg 2.

within these changes. The executive board still included a few members from the founder generation after the First World War – Friedrich Hossbach, Christel Eulen, and Otto Margraf, all of whom were at advanced ages and left the Volksbund by 1970. Also in attendance were newer board members from the ranks of the Volksbund, best exemplified by Willi Thiele. Born in 1915, he served in the Wehrmacht following his conscription in 1940. After the war he studied law in Freiburg and received his doctorate from the University of Cologne in 1956 before working for the Interior Ministry. He joined the SPD sometime in the early 1960s and by the time of this meeting in 1968, was the administrative president of Braunschweig. Thiele's professional career was rooted in West Germany's liberal-democratic political system, and he was much more willing to adapt the Volksbund's commemorative approach to a changing society.

The student movements and lack of support from West German youth, which had become a corner stone of the Volksbund's work abroad since the 1950s, had shaken much of the executive board enough to consider a new approach. During their 1968 session amidst growing student unrest throughout West Germany, one speaker commented "We cannot and do not want to do without the 'conservatives,' because they created the Volksbund and have essentially supported it to this day. Yet, we must not do without the young 'progressives' because the work of the Volksbund can only have a future with them."³⁹⁶ At the end of the meeting, the executive decided it was more important to win over the latter group. This fundamental shift in approach led to the election of Willi Thiele as the new President of the Volksbund at same moment the last members of the founder generation left. A new willingness to engage critically with the recent German past more than its predecessors had

³⁹⁶ Sitzung des Präsidiums am 05.04.1968, Kassel, betr. Die Geistigen Grundlagen des Volksbundes,“ DAB 1.7-133-1, pg 3.

beset the top rank of the Volksbund. Whether Thiele could convince the Volksbund's conservative base at the regional level of his new approach was another issue.

It is interesting to note that the Volksbund executive board only reluctantly moved towards a more critical stance towards the past out of what it saw as a political necessity for its future survival and defined it politically as a conservative/progressive dichotomy. For an organization that often described itself as apolitical and without political affiliation, they only perceived the criticism against them and their commemorative practices as politically motivated rather than ethically, morally, or intellectually— an unsurprising but important to recognize reaction for an organization defined by a self-proclaimed adherence to traditions in a moment of social transformation. However, the now dominant, state-supported attempt to collapse all distinctions among victims of the Second World War into one category – *Opfer des Krieges und Gewaltherrschaft* (victims of war and tyranny) – had left its mark on executive board's strategy for the future. The universalizing “All Victims Together” approach had the potential to settle societal divisions by making room for all political viewpoints but remained murky enough that no one group could point to a definite position.

For the first time, the Volksbund's president had not been socialized within the association or in its structures before 1945. The beginning of Thiele's term of office also marked a turning point in the direction of the association's content, at least for a time. This shift attempted to recreate both its self-image and the ability to win over future generations for the continuation of its work and membership. Above all, the generational change from the war to the post-war generation was becoming apparent among the members and forced a renewed discussion of the question of how the work of the Volksbund should be justified and presented to the outside world in order to still receive broad social support. As historian Jakob Böttcher demonstrated in his 2018 study on the Volksbund, this time marked a changing understanding of youth work at the Volksbund, which was increasingly understood

as political educational work.³⁹⁷ But the Volksbund could never completely break with its veteran partners. As the generation who fought First World War aged out of the Volksbund, veterans of the Second World War came to dominate the Volksbund's structure from the regional to national levels, and the vast majority did not share Willi Thiele's progressive sentiments.

Conclusion – 1970: A Turning Point for the Volksbund?

The change in leadership in the Volksbund in 1970 brought a new approach to engaging with the East under the guise of détente, which would have been impossible under the staunchly anti-Communist older leadership. Yugoslavia was the first major breakthrough chronologically, largely due to Willi Brandt's meeting with Josip Tito in April 1973, but the Volksbund's prior connections helped build up to this moment. Here the Volksbund sent delegates to visit the sites and connected with people on the ground - still impossible in most of the Eastern bloc. However, Marshall Tito's socialist regime in Belgrade made sure their own political goals of reparations from West Germany could not be side-stepped. Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* helped breakthrough the deadlock surrounding the reparations question, but the experience demonstrated that the German war graves in the East could not be reached without negotiations, often tied to state interests. If the communist states were going to consider allowing the commemoration of possible war criminals on their territories, West Germany was going to have make concessions in some other areas of interest, whether it be political, diplomatic, or economic. The next chapter will detail these negotiations in Eastern Europe between 1973 and 1982.

The situation for the Volksbund and Protestant church's clandestine project in East Germany became more difficult rather than easier. As twenty and twenty-five-year waiting periods lapsed between 1965 and 1970, communal authorities began to erase German war

³⁹⁷ Böttcher, *Zwischen staatlichem Auftrag*, 207.

graves. Détente incentivized the SED to preserve the war graves of foreign adversaries in the larger Cold War struggle, but this did not change the SED's position on German war graves. If anything, it demonstrated the commitment of local authorities to erasing these last reminders of Germany's fascist past and defeat on socialist territory. The Protestant churches in East Germany, and after 1969 officially the BEK, became divided over committing their effort to the preservation of German war graves as a new generation of pastors critical of this work and more willing to work with the SED offered resistance. The support of high-ranking church officials such as High Consistory Hans-Jürgen Behm in Berlin, and the commitment of the *Vertrauenspfarrer* ensured this work continued, especially after the division of the Protestant church between East and West Germany made the administrative role of the Berlin Bureau even more difficult. With the normalization of relations through the basic treaty of 1972, it now appeared that a divided Germany was to remain the status quo. The ties between the Lutherans in East Germany and the Volksbund loosened in the last half of the Cold War era as the two pursued commemorative approaches best suited for their own political realities.

Chapter 5: Reconciliation Across Europe 1973-1982

The Volksbund's vision of a multi-national, European commemoration of the Second World War came to fruition by appealing to reactionary and restorative European conservative regimes. In Western Europe, this was especially the case in the post-1968 French Fifth republic and Greece's Third Hellenic republic. As the Volksbund seemed to complete its victory lap in Western Europe, its focus turned more towards Eastern Europe, especially with the support of West Germany's SPD led government. Within the context of West Germany's *Neue Ostpolitik*, the diplomatic interests of chancellor Willy Brandt and the Volksbund's commemorative interests in Eastern Europe aligned to create a new approach to settling Germany's war grave question. Rather than signed war grave agreements between governments and broad social reconciliation between Germans and the peoples of Eastern Europe, Brandt and Thiele pursued a reconciliation from above through appealing to the interests of Warsaw pact heads of state, who claimed to speak for the interests of their peoples under authoritarian rule. This was particularly the case in Romania, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Hungary approached the Volksbund only through Red Cross intermediaries, ensuring some institutional separation with those wanting to commemorate "fascist war dead."

Poland joined East Germany in refusing any discussion on the German war graves question, representing the limit of the Volksbund's success even with its influential state partner. In contrast, several smaller organizations made considerable contributions to German-Polish reconciliation during the 1970s. One such organization was *Aktion Sühnezeichen* (Action Atonement) or ASZ, whose members the Volksbund began encountering more frequently. The ASZ approached reconciliation from the premise of accepting German guilt. Preserving German war graves was not part of its program, and it made inroads into prominent circles of the Polish Catholic church and nationalist dissidents.

The Volksbund failed to take advantage of ASZ's success due its refusal to cooperate out of political differences and remained *persona non grata* in Poland.

Solidifying the West: The Volksbund Commemorations in France and Greece

By the mid-1970s, the Volksbund considered its main tasks in Western Europe complete. The last few cemeteries that had sat in bureaucratic limbo for years in France and Greece were now nearing completion. In 1975 “last German Soldier’s cemetery of the Second World War in France,” as it was advertised in the press, was opened on June 7, 1975 in Bergheim bei Colmar in South Alsace, containing 5307 fallen from the German offensive in June 1940 and during the defensive retreat in December/January 1944/45.³⁹⁸ That same year, the Dionyssos-Rependoza military cemetery, 27 km northeast of Athens and the only German war cemetery on the Greek mainland, was also opened. The ceremony that marked the occasion in Dionyssos-Rapendoza was attended by almost 1000 relatives and former comrades of the fallen from all parts of the Federal Republic of Germany and Austria, Germans residing in Athens, representatives of the diplomatic corps, public figures, religious dignitaries as well as officers and a procession of honor of the Greek army. The President of the Volksbund, Willi Thiele, held a commemorative speech where he proclaimed, “the countless military cemeteries of two world wars in Europe and almost everywhere in the world should remain a constant reminder to reject war and violence as a political tool.” Representing the Greek government, Defense Minister Evangelos Averoff emphasized that those who were once enemies have now become friends and allies, and that “Greece considered it its duty to grant the fallen German soldiers’ hospitality on Greek soil and to receive the relatives of the dead with warm hospitality.” The ceremony ended with the traditional honoring of the dead through a wreath-laying ceremony and a wind ensemble

³⁹⁸ Volksbund Press Release 08.06.1975, BArch BW 1/113846.

played the Prussian military anthem *Ich hatt' einen Kameraden*, followed by the Greek and West German national anthems played by a Greek military band.³⁹⁹

The event also served to add legitimacy to the nascent Third Greek republic. Not long after the Greek parliament had approved its war graves agreement with West Germany in May 1965, a Greek military junta launched a coup against the democratic government and plunged the country into another decade of violence and chaos. Having written a new democratic constitution in 1975, the new Greek democracy wanted to pursue integration into the European Economic Community and sought support from one of the organization's most prosperous member – West Germany. A guest worker agreement signed in 1960 with West Germany also relieved high unemployment in Greece and brought in remittances to stimulate its economy. In addition, Greece had benefitted from considerable West German tourism. The ceremony at Dionyssos-Rependoza ended not only a long and often delayed process of consolidating German war dead onto a centralized location managed by the Volksbund but also marked the culmination of building Greco-German relations. During the cultural and political upheavals of 1968 as students in both Bonn and Athens marched against what they saw as a fascist resurgence⁴⁰⁰, and the military junta in Athens enforced brutal and draconian laws to suppress the student movement. West Germany continued its economic and political support of Greece, nonetheless. The alliance was awkward for the rest of Western Europe and served as fodder for propaganda in Eastern Europe. The constitutional reform of 1974 returned democratic rule to Greece, and the center-right government believed West Germany to be its most dependable ally in Europe. Only West Germany and the United States maintained diplomatic and economic ties during the Junta years. Memories of German

³⁹⁹ Volksbund Press Release 29.09.1975, BArch BW 1/113846; a traditional Prussian military song from the 19th century that celebrates camaraderie and shared front line experience.

⁴⁰⁰ In West Germany, the youth of the “extra parliamentary opposition” were appalled by chancellor Kurt Kiesinger's Nazi past, the creation of a Great Coalition between the CDU and SPD, and the passage of emergency laws, on top of Bonn's financial support of the United State's war in Vietnam. All of which the youth left-wing movements perceived as evidence of a fascist resurgence by 1968.

occupation drifted further as recent political chaos and tension with Greece's communist neighbors in Albania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia – not to mention regional tensions with Turkey over Cyprus – continued.⁴⁰¹

As important as the ceremony in Dionyssos-Rependoza was, the Volksbund celebrated another event as its benchmark for success in the west. On February 4, French and German diplomatic corps celebrated Franco-German reconciliation under the Arc de Triomphe and Volksbund President Willi Thiele attended. The West German Ambassador to France Dr. Hans Ruete and Willi Thiele met at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris and laid a wreath together. He wrote Chancellor Brandt about what he saw as the culmination of decades of work by the Volksbund, and a turning point in centuries of Franco-German animosity. "This ceremony was given a remarkably solemn setting by the French authorities in charge, and it also drew a great deal of attention from the French public. For the first time outside of the events of a state visit, the German national anthem was played under the Arc de Triomphe, played by a French military band, a moving moment for every German participant."⁴⁰² The melding of two national commemorative cultures to honor their respective war dead on equal standing was what the Volksbund had been striving for since 1919. And perhaps even more significant for West German pride, a German commemorative event was held at the Arc de Triomphe – the key monument and space for French commemoration of war dead since the Napoleonic era. Even after the shake up in the Volksbund leadership the few years prior, this achievement was nonetheless celebrated.

The event also indicated a fresh start in Franco-German relations post-Charles de Gaulle. During de Gaulle's long tenure as president of France starting in 1958, France and

⁴⁰¹ See: Mogens Pelt, *Tying Greece to the West: US-West German-Greek Relations 1949-1974. Studies in 20th & 21st Century European History*, (Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 285-353.

⁴⁰² Letter to Chancellor Brandt from Volksbund President Willi Thiele, 04.02.1972, BArch B 136/5068.

West Germany cultivated close diplomatic and economic relations as the leading members of the European Economic Community. Yet, de Gaulle pursued a different path of European integration and military leadership against the Warsaw Pact that aimed to establish French leadership of the EEC and turning away from the US led NATO. De Gaulle's policies caused friction with Bonn, especially after the end of chancellor Konrad Adenauer's administration, who had been a close ally of de Gaulle, in 1962. The student protests and general strike of May 1968 nearly brought about the collapse of France's Fifth Republic and the end of de Gaulle's presidency in 1969. Bonn supported de Gaulle when he sought refuge in West Germany in May 1968, but was quite relieved when another conservative, Georges Pompidou succeeded him as president and followed a diplomatic and economic policy that aligned more with West German interests – EEC and NATO expansion.⁴⁰³

One difference Thiele had from his predecessors was acknowledging that the Volksbund played a political role. He continued in his letter to Chancellor Brandt,

I agree with the Ambassador that this event is of fundamental political importance. As you surely know, dear Chancellor, the German war graves commission has its main area of work there because of the fighting in the two world wars on French soil. The ceremony under the Arc de Triomphe was therefore intended to be a gesture of gratitude from the German people and above all from the surviving relatives of the German war dead buried in France for the fact that the French and their government had been there since the First World War - regardless of the respective political relations between the two countries - always respected and preserved the graves of the fallen German soldiers, always promoted their education and care by the Volksbund and visits by relatives in a fair and understanding manner.⁴⁰⁴

The iciness and lethargy of the French bureaucracy towards the care German war graves in the first post war decade had clearly been forgotten. By 1972, European integration had produced the necessary conditions for reconciliation among once hostile commemorative cultures.

⁴⁰³ Heinrich August Winkler, *Germany: The Long Road West*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), 232-3.

⁴⁰⁴ Letter to Chancellor Brandt from Volksbund President Willi Thiele, 04.02.1972, BArch B 136/5068.

Thiele remained aware, however, that not all segments of French society were comfortable with this cozying up of Franco-German war commemoration. He continued, “Nevertheless, we know, of course, that old anti-German resentments still persist in France. I consider it all the more remarkable that at the ceremony under the Arc de Triomphe and at the receptions given by the Volksbund and the German embassy on this occasion, representatives of the French resistance groups accepted the German invitation and sought to speak to me.”⁴⁰⁵ Which “French resistance groups” wanted to attend a ceremony commemorating German war dead at the Arc de Triomphe may be suspect. While Charles de Gaulle was President of France, he cultivated an image of the French resistance fighter that included both those who actively fought – most of whom were members of the French communist and socialist parties, alienated politically from De Gaulle’s post-war political regime – and those who resisted “spiritually” through passive resistance, or even collaboration as former Vichy officials. In other words, the image of the French resistance came to dominate French wartime experience, blurring the lines between resistance and collaboration – comparable to the “all victim’s together” approach in West Germany. In May 1968, French students and workers brought France’s economy and government to the brink of revolution protesting against the war in Vietnam, consumer capitalism, political ostracization of the “New Left,” and French conservatism broadly. Many left-wing, youth radicals, and some older members of the wartime communist underground protested against what they saw as a continuation of Vichy fascism in French society. It is possible that the “resistance groups” that wanted to meet with Volksbund president Willi Thiele passively accepted German occupation and Vichy rule, or even actively collaborated with the German occupiers.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁵ Letter to Chancellor Brandt from Volksbund President Willi Thiele, 04.02.1972, BArch B 136/5068.

⁴⁰⁶ See: Henry Rousso, “Repressions,” in *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, (Harvard University: Harvard University Press, 1994), 60-97; especially, 71-82.

Thiele then described to Chancellor Brandt a meeting with the head of the French Ministry of War Victims, Minister Duvillard. Thiele described Duvillard as “not a particularly keen advocate of Franco-German friendship, but still warmly praised the Volksbund's peace work.”⁴⁰⁷ Duvillard and Thiele had discussed the possibility of a “supranational day of remembrance” of Europe that would become a cornerstone of European integration. This notion was a short-lived dream of the Volksbund, one that it hoped would help integrate Europe on a traditional, conservative basis with each nationality honoring its own war dead on an equal basis – without guilt, shame, or resentment. However, as the Volksbund encountered in Eastern Europe, relying on traditional nationalist commemorative practices precluded this goal in the first place. A national lens focusing on past conflicts could often accentuate the very “psychological consequences” the Volksbund wanted to overcome. The topic of Thiele’s letter then shifted to the war graves question in Eastern Europe. Thiele depicted Minister Duvillard as “reluctant” to discuss this “and only saw possibilities through official French foreign policy on this question.”⁴⁰⁸ Thiele disagreed and argued “that this activity of the Volksbund, so to speak ‘below the threshold’ of official diplomacy, can support the peace efforts of your foreign policy.”⁴⁰⁹ Thiele presented the success of the Volksbund’s efforts in reconciling Franco-German commemorative cultures, a process that had been underway since the Adenauer era, and grew along with European integration. The efforts of the previous, more conservative Volksbund leadership in connecting its commemorative program with Adenauer’s *Westbindung* yielded results in the West, but failed reach Eastern Europe. Thiele assured Brandt that his new approach to “Reconciliation over the Graves” would be an asset to the government’s foreign policy goals under *Neue Ostpolitik*.

⁴⁰⁷ Letter to Chancellor Brandt from Volksbund President Willi Thiele, 04.02.1972, BArch B 136/5068.

⁴⁰⁸ Letter to Chancellor Brandt from Volksbund President Willi Thiele, 04.02.1972, BArch B 136/5068.

⁴⁰⁹ Letter to Chancellor Brandt from Volksbund President Willi Thiele, 04.02.1972, BArch B 136/5068.

Volksbund Efforts in Eastern Central Europe

While the Volksbund and Foreign Office's efforts failed to move Soviet officials to cooperate or even discuss the issue of war graves by 1965, they did not stop trying to achieve breakthroughs with other states of the Eastern Bloc. In most cases, they met the same sort of resistance but had small successes in Hungary and Czechoslovakia through partnership with the International Red Cross. In 1963, the Hungarian Red Cross agreed to accept requests from citizens of West Germany, provided by the German Red Cross and the Volksbund, to care for individual graves. This translated to about 2000 graves secured against 53-55,000 known German war graves in Hungary. This relationship became the basis for the Volksbund's activity in Hungary during the Cold War-era. There were repeated attempts to expand the Volksbund's access to all German war graves on Hungarian territory. Volksbund representatives, as well as high level talks between West German Chancellors Willi Brandt, Helmut Schmidt, and eventually Helmut Kohl with Hungarian premier Janos Kadar all ended without further breakthroughs, despite Kadar consistently making vague overtures of working with the Volksbund.

One Wehrmacht veteran writing to Chancellor Schmidt gave some his own opinion on why the Hungarian state wanted to keep the Volksbund's activities limited in their scope. The veteran, who had been stationed in Hungary at the end of the war, wrote that one of the reasons for the continued refusal of the Hungarian government was because most of the graves were of the Waffen-SS.⁴¹⁰ The only major campaign in Hungary was during the last months of the war between the Soviet invasion in September 1944 and its final liberation from the Nazis and Miklos Horthy's Hungarian fascist regime on April 4, 1945. The number of German war dead was therefore much lower, and the Waffen-SS with its fascist Hungarian auxiliaries played a considerable role in fighting the Red Army in Hungary. The number was

⁴¹⁰ Letter to Chancellor Schmidt 29.08.1979, BArch 136/16494.

small enough to resist pressure from the Volksbund and West German politicians so as to not embarrass Janos Kadar before his people and the Soviets for commemorating German and Hungarian fascists. Later negotiations between the Volksbund and the Hungarian Red Cross accelerated the registration for about half the 54,000 German war graves by the end of the 1970s. The Volksbund tried push for the care of all 54,000, but the vast majority had no relatives requesting such care. The Hungarian government refused granting general protection to German war graves without the requests of surviving families.⁴¹¹

Similar to Hungary, Czechoslovakia had a relatively small number of German war dead, with the only fighting occurring in the final months, and most of the German dead likely from more fanatical units, such as the Waffen SS. In Czechoslovakia, the Volksbund experienced some positive but limited breakthroughs in the 1960s. In the fall of 1964, the Czechoslovak Red Cross invited the Volksbund's *Referat Ost* to Prague, who brought the members to cemeteries in "Sudetenland, Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia" and agreed to start registering and caring for German war graves case by case.⁴¹² The Czechoslovak Red Cross promised to begin negotiations for their care with state officials, but like Hungary, the government kept its distance.⁴¹³

There was also evidence that some private Czechoslovak citizens had been caring for some of the scattered, German war graves for many years as had been the case in Yugoslavia. In one case filed by the Berlin Bureau, an East German Protestant official named Otto

⁴¹¹ Internal Report of the Foreign Office Bonn Betreff Deutsche Kriegsgräber in Ungarn, 06.08.1979, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴¹² Referat Ost notably used the old German names for these Czechoslovak regions in its report. "Bericht aus der Ostarbeit des Volksbundes," 20.11.1964, Volksbund Archive A 100-1053.

⁴¹³ See: Maren Hachmeister, *Selbstorganisation im Sozialismus: Das Rote Kreuz in Polen und der Tschechoslowakei 1945-1989* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019). This source does not address Red Cross' relationship to the Volksbund, nor its role in providing graves and memorials for fallen German and other "fascist" war dead, such as Italian and Hungarian soldiers. Rather, it details how an independent NGO promoting Western standards of managed to exist within state socialism and maintain a working relationship with the communist parties of Poland and Czechoslovakia, occasionally referencing the Red Cross in Hungary, Soviet Union, and Romania. This depiction helps illuminate how the Red Cross found itself working on behalf of some state socialist regimes with the Volksbund, particularly in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and the Soviet Union.

Frömke explained that he often vacationed in Czechoslovakia and visited the locations where he was stationed during the war. His Wehrmacht unit was stationed in Pribis, Slovakia in November 1944 where seven of his comrades fell and were buried by a Catholic Priest by his recollection. Frömke visited this location, as well as the cemetery in Oravsky-Podzamok. Frömke was surprised to find that wooden crosses were erected and had been taken care of over the many years, even though the graves were overgrown with grass.⁴¹⁴ Whether these graves were cared for by visiting Germans or local Slovaks with pro-German sympathies – possible former collaborators – remains uncertain.

For the duration of the Cold War, the care of German war graves in Czechoslovakia proceeded largely on an individual basis without an official state to state agreement. The Hungarian and Czech governments likely pushed the war graves question onto the Red Cross branches of their respective countries out of a similar logic. The Red Cross in both countries was one of the very few organizations that operated outside of the state, which often caused tension with the state socialist regimes in Prague and Budapest but proved useful in other ways – namely pushing issues on to the Red Cross that the communists did want to engage with such as burying and commemorating fascist war dead.

Continued Efforts in Poland

In Poland, while the Volksbund failed to make any breakthroughs, the faith-based organization *Aktion Sühnezeichen* (Action Atonement or ASZ), partnered with the Catholic church and found more success in pursuing German-Polish reconciliation. Founded in 1958 in West Germany, followed by a twin organization in the GDR in 1966, the ASZ was based on the writings of Lutheran church leader in Magdeburg, Lothar Kreyszig. Kreyszig had been a member of the Confessing Church and a judge in a guardian court during the Nazi era and

⁴¹⁴ “Brief an die Abt. GF von OKR Otto Frömke den 12.11.1979,“ EZA 110/115.

vocally condemned the Nazi murder of the disabled in 1940, which led to his disbarment.⁴¹⁵ After 1945, he promulgated the ideas of collective German and church guilt from the Stuttgart declaration of 1945 and the declaration of Weißensee in 1950.⁴¹⁶ The latter declaration emphasized the debt of German Christians to Jews and argued a special German relationship with the newly established state of Israel. The ASZ emphasized the active participation of Germans as opposed to the previous declarations that emphasized inaction on the part of the church and passive collaboration of most Germans. Kreyssig argued that an active perpetration of murders against the Jewish people demanded an active attempt of atonement with God and reconciliation with the Jewish people, against whom – referring to both God and the Jewish people – all Germans East and West had incurred a massive debt. The ASZ's approach to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was not a legal or judicial approach, but one of spiritual and cultural catharsis and addressed all Germans – not just parishioners – to participate.⁴¹⁷

The ASZ in East Germany adjusted to the Warsaw Pact's opposition to Israel by its founding in 1966 and focused on spiritual atonement and secular reconciliation with Poles.⁴¹⁸ The ASZ was dependent on Catholic connections for their work in Poland, particularly through Günter Särchen, a lay-official in the archbishop's commissariat of Magdeburg. Särchen was a Sorb, which helped him to build trust among his West-Slavic brethren on

⁴¹⁵ David Doellinger, "Finding a Space to Think and Act Freely." In *Turning Prayers into Protests: Religious-Based Activism and Its Challenge to State Power in Socialist Slovakia and East Germany*, Central European University Press, 2013, 49.

⁴¹⁶ The Stuttgart Declaration of 1945 was an admission of guilt on the part of German protestants that the churches could have done more to protect those persecuted by the Nazis, including their own (ie. the Confessing Church). The Declaration Weißensee in 1950 addressed specifically Protestant guilt for condoning and tolerating Nazi persecution and murder of Europe's Jews. The declaration also outlined a plan of atonement between German protestants and Israel. These declarations were more symbolic than binding. Some Protestant churches took the ideals of these declarations more seriously than others. See: Matthew D Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Indiana University Press, 2004); Anton Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung – Über die Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste in der BRD sowie in der DDR und Gedenkdienste in Österreich* (Leipzig, 2011).

⁴¹⁷ Anton Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung – Über die Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste in der BRD sowie in der DDR und Gedenkdienste in Österreich* (Leipzig: 2011), 36.

⁴¹⁸ Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 281.

ethnic grounds. Religious-ethnic connections between predominantly Catholic Sorbs and Poles had a long tradition dating back to the late 18th century. Even in Communist Poland, some Catholic leaders still spoke of “saving the Catholic Slavs living in Eastern Germany, such as the Sorbs, from German [Protestant] heresy.”⁴¹⁹ Särchen’s special relationship with Polish Catholics was critical to the ASZ’s strategy. Särchen fostered personal relationships with Polish Catholic leaders and Catholic student groups in Poznan and other major cities. He also worked with the editor of the St. Brenno-Verlag in Leipzig, which gave him the opportunity to bring reconciliatory texts by ASZ leaders and other German theologians into Poland.

Särchen contributed to shifting ASZ emphasis in East Germany towards reconciliation with Poland. He wrote in his diary in 1961 after his second trip to Poland,

Over the years, the German side has already said and written a lot about what was done to the Jews. A position was also taken openly on the question of guilt. But strange, one hardly hears anything about what was done to the Eastern peoples. But before the Polish people, for example, empty words in this direction would certainly be useless. Any readiness for atonement and atonement that consists of words alone is useless. But there is one thing that the Polish people would certainly take deep in their hearts and understand: an atonement shown to the Polish Church.⁴²⁰

His position was influenced by state socialism’s emphasis on the memory of national suffering at the hands of the Nazis and the heroism of anti-Fascist partisans common to the Eastern Bloc. There was little room for Jewish memory of the Holocaust under state socialism. Communist parties chose to gain the support of their citizens by honoring national heroes rather than give them more reason to associate their Communist regimes with “Judeo-Bolshevism” – a widespread Antisemitic trope and source of reactionary fear across interwar Europe.⁴²¹ The ASZ, just as it adapted towards Jewish memory of the Holocaust in the West,

⁴¹⁹ Strobel, “Die Kirche Polens,” 108.

⁴²⁰ Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 287.

⁴²¹ See: Paul Hanebrink, “Chapter 5: Under Communist Rule,” in *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Communism*, Harvard: Belknap Press, 2018, pg 163-199.

adjusted its approach to the memory landscape of national Communism in the East. As a result, the reconciliation work led by Särchen took the forms of small group trips to memorial sites in Poland, such as Auschwitz, Chelmno, Majdanek, and Groß Rosen, foregrounding German atonement for crimes against the Polish nation at these memorial sites. Särchen also brought his program to seminars at universities, churches, interchurch conferences, and Catholic publications.

Several influential Polish leaders were in Särchen's circle of personal contacts and helped give the ASZ a positive perception among Poles. Among them were Krakow Cardinal Karol Józef Wojtyła and lead editor of the Catholic Monthly publication *Więź* Tadeusz Mazowiecki. Mazowiecki was an important leader of the Polish Solidarity movement and became the first prime minister of the post-communist Republic of Poland. Cardinal Wojtyła wrote in 1977 about Särchen, the year before he was elected as Pope John Paul II, "I fully appreciate your initiative and work in the Reconciliation Campaign and in the Polish Seminary, as well as the dissemination of important documents among your fellow countrymen, which can contribute to the work of reconciliation of our peoples."⁴²² Bishop Boleslaw Kominek was another close colleague of Särchen around 1970, whom he surprised with his affinity for German culture, and yet ardent Polish nationalism.⁴²³ By the 1980s, these connections assured ASZ's prominent position and positive reception among Polish Catholics and the Polish Solidarity movement.

The Volksbund failed to take advantage of ASZ's influential position in Polish religious and nationalist circles during Poland's communist era. Due to political differences outlined in upcoming chapters, the Volksbund encountered the ASZ in other contexts but more often rejected cooperation. The West Berlin branch of the Volksbund was the

⁴²² Legerer, *Tatort: Versöhnung*, 282.

⁴²³ Zurek, "Boleslaw Kominek," 60.

exception. Its members collaborated with the ASZ to restore the cemetery of murdered Jews in La Boisse, France near Lyon in the late 1960s, but much of the Volksbund leadership considered the ASZ “fanatically left-wing” and refused to work with them. The Volksbund General Secretary in 1981 Hans Soltau admitted that “it is no longer feasible to have a productive exchange with them [the ASZ].”⁴²⁴ The Volksbund chose the much more difficult path of attempting rapprochement with Poland through its own commemorative prerogatives. Poland marked the boundary of the Volksbund’s role in Willi Brandt’s *Neue Ostpolitik* – one it never managed to cross. The East German government also refused to budge on the war graves question despite normalization of relations following the Basic Treaty of 1972. But the Volksbund at least an ongoing project already advancing its goals in East Germany.

The Volksbund often expressed its frustration and disappointment in the lack of progress in Poland in their letters and publications, but cited the breakthroughs in Yugoslavia, Romania, and the Soviet Union a source of optimism that this may change in time. Not until September 1977 did the Volksbund leadership see an opportunity to advance its goals through Bonn’s improved relationship with Warsaw under its *Neue Ostpolitik*. Volksbund President Willi Thiele wrote to Chancellor Schmidt,

I understand from a statement of the Press and Information Office of the Federal Government that you are paying an official visit to Poland from September 19-23 of this year. I would be grateful if you would also bring up the problem of the German soldiers' graves with Secretary Giereck. My talks with Polish Ambassador Piatkowski [in Bonn] have been unsuccessful for years. I have to assume that there will only be a change if you and the federal government take up our concern.⁴²⁵

The recent successes in gaining access to German war graves in the Soviet Union, Romania, Yugoslavia, and elsewhere were largely due to the intervention of the Chancellery. The office

⁴²⁴ “Vermerk über einen Besuch des Bundesgeschäftsführers des VDKs am 17.02.1982 in der Kirchenkanzlei Hannover, den 18.02.1982,” EZA 2/17670.

⁴²⁵ Letter from Volksbund President Willi Thiele to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, 09.12.1977, BArch B 136/16494.

of the Chancellery replied on September 19 that “you can be assured that Chancellor Schmidt will discuss this issue with First Secretary Giereck.”⁴²⁶

On November 28, 1977, the West German embassy in Warsaw notified the Volksbund, through the Foreign Office in Bonn, that:

in the course of the Chancellor's visit, Ministerial Director Ruhfus briefly addressed the question of certain efforts to find German war graves in Poland with Deputy Foreign Minister Czyrek. Czyrek had shown himself to be very reserved on this issue, referring to the millions of Polish victims of World War II, about whose whereabouts there were no clues. A large-scale German war graves campaign in Poland could therefore not be considered for a long time. On the other hand, individual cases could be taken up between the Volksbund and BONGO if necessary.⁴²⁷

Schmidt's visit to Warsaw did not make the difference the Volksbund had hoped for.

BONGO, or the Office for the Care of Foreign Graves in Warsaw, had rejected cooperation with the Volksbund twenty years prior. Not willing to pursue that route again, the Volksbund's efforts with Poland fell back to square one.

But some promising news came regarding the existence of German war graves from a private West German citizen named Bruno Dierke visiting the Polish People's Republic in 1976. He provided an extensive report of his attempts to locate the graves of 100 plus members of a *Reichsarbeitsdienst* unit - conscripted German laborers, usually men between the ages of 18 and 25 – who were executed per bullet to the neck after an engagement with Soviet soldiers in January 1945 near Łódź, Poland. Among them was his brother. Dierke explained that he was under surveillance by the security service in Poland, but “talked freely with a Polish historian who was helpful and with local clerics.” Apparently, the older Catholic priests in the towns near Łódź were unwilling to guide him, but he met a younger priest who was willing. The location of the mass grave was in a former Lutheran German

⁴²⁶ Letter from the Office of the Chancellor Helmut Schmidt to Volksbund President Willi Thiele, 19.09.1977, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴²⁷ Letter from the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany to the Foreign Office in Bonn, 28.11.1977, BArch 136/16494.

cemetery that also contained dead from the First World War. Dierke described the cemetery as “completely neglected and barely recognizable...having been used as storage yard for building materials and a dumping ground.”⁴²⁸ The choice of a former German and Lutheran cemetery for the mass grave revealed that whoever placed the remains there, whether they be German POWs, German civilians prior to expulsion, or even local Poles, chose the site for the mass grave out of ethnic-religious reasons. The use of the site as a storage facility and dumping ground speaks to local efforts to erase the German presence on Polish territory.

Bruno Dierke met with Volksbund President Willi Thiele after his return to West Germany, believing based on his experiences that the time might be ripe for the Volksbund to reattempt its reconciliation efforts with Poland. Citing the ongoing negotiations over war graves in the Soviet Union with ambassador Valentin Falin, Dierke suggested to Thiele that there should also be an urgent discussion over the graves in Poland. He added that “this must be done despite politics; try to bridge the opposite positions and form a basis between Willy Brandt’s *Kniefall* and the expellee press of Herbert Hupka!”⁴²⁹ Dierke noted that even if the Volksbund could not do anything in the moment that he had some resources. Dierke claimed that he brought tons of documents to the American occupation office for the *Suchdienst* and

⁴²⁸ “Brief an Herrn Hammer von Herrn Dierke, betr. Massengräber von Reichsarbeitsdienstangehörigen im Wartheland und Niederschlesien, Bezug Ermittlungsaktion RAD-Abteilung 3/401 Adelnau; Unterredung mit Herrn Prof. Dr. jur. Willi Thiele, Präsident des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge von 11.08.1976,“ EZA 2/17671.

⁴²⁹ Hupka was a member of the German Bundestag from 1969 to 1987. The focus of his political work was expellee policy. From 1968 to 2000 he was President of the Silesian Landsmannschaft. Hupka positioned himself against Brandt’s *Neue Ostpolitik*, in particular against the settlement with the GDR and Poland and accused her of naivety towards the Soviet Union. He rejected any renunciation of the former German eastern territories administered by Poland or the Soviet Union and advocated for a long time their reincorporation into a German state. With his rejection of the Oder-Neisse border, he not only made himself unpopular with the political left. On February 29, 1972, Hupka switched from the SPD to the CDU. The relationship with his new party was not without conflict either. When the motto “40 years of expulsion - Silesia remains ours” was selected for the Silesian meeting in 1985 under the leadership of Hupka. CDU politicians criticized the claims of ownership as “aggressive.” Chancellor Kohl, who was intended to be the guest speaker, canceled his appearance. After massive pressure both in front and behind the scenes, Hupka withdrew the motto and replaced it with “Silesia remains our future in a Europe of free peoples.” See: Michael Hansmann, “Herbert Hupka,” Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Last modified August 2006, <https://www.kas.de/de/web/geschichte-der-cdu/personen/biogramm-detail/-/content/herbert-hupka>, accessed 01/26/2024.

had contacts that could mobilize hundreds of relatives and the press.⁴³⁰ The Volksbund shared Dierke's report and his conversation with President Thiele, cultural, and religious leaders in West Germany, such as President Walter Scheel, Chancellor Schmidt, the Party leaderships of the CDU, CSU, FDP and SPD, archbishop of Cologne Cardinal Joseph Höffner, and the head of the Lutheran Chancery Walter Hammer.⁴³¹

The Lutheran Chancery followed up on Dierke's report and sought to find out if the Lutheran cemetery near Łódź could be renewed and reconstructed through its own efforts while the Volksbund remained *persona non grata* in Poland.⁴³² The Lutheran church chose Dr. Hans-Kurt Boehlke to head the proposed project. Boehlke was an architect, art historian, and leader and founder of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Friedhof und Denkmal* (Cemetery and Memorial Working Group) based in Frankfurt am Main, an organization dedicated to the study and support of Christian Western sepulchral culture.⁴³³ Boehlke communicated with a Lutheran official named Fritz Eitel who had connections through *Aktion Sühnezeichen* to Poland and also wanted a role in a possible war graves project there.⁴³⁴ Boehlke learned of the Volksbund's persistent goal to have some sort of direct contact with Poland and admitted to Pastor Eitel in a letter "that there is a lot of emotion on the Polish side. Many Poles deny the existence of German cemeteries out of politically colored historical consciousness to argue that 'of course it couldn't have been German if it wasn't allowed to be German.'" Boehlke advised that if negotiations make any progress, splitting the research and influence

⁴³⁰ "Brief an Herrn Hammer von Herrn Dierke, betr. Massengräber von Reichsarbeitsdienstangehörigen im Wartheland und Niederschlesien, Bezug Ermittlungsaktion RAD-Abteilung 3/401 Adelnau; Unterredung mit Herrn Prof. Dr. jur. Willi Thiele, Präsident des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge von 11.08.1976," EZA 2/17671.

⁴³¹ "Deckblatt des Berichts Bruno Dierkes Wolfsburg den 01.10.1976," EZA 2/17671.

⁴³² "Brief von OKR Krapp an Bruno Dierke den 14.12.1976, Abschrift an Kirchenrat Fritz Eitel," EZA 2/17671.

⁴³³ <https://www.sepulkralmuseum.de/EN/society/study-group-cemetery-and-monument/about-the-study-group>, accessed 07/25/2023.

⁴³⁴ "Brief an Dr. Hans-Kurt Boehlke Arbeitsgemeinschaft Friedhof und Denkmal den 05.01.1977, betr. Würdige Herrichtung von Grablagen von Gefallenen in der VRPolen," EZA 2/17671.

between the Volksbund and Polish officials in Warsaw would be a disadvantage. Boehlke offered the Volksbund that once an agreement was reached, he would reach out to his own contacts in Poland who are in the same profession of caring for cemeteries and monuments. Boehlke suggested that the Lutheran Church could have some success “contacting Catholic clerics in Poland, who might have a positive resonance.”⁴³⁵

Pastor Fritz Eitel recommended to Boehlke that the ASZ might be their best option despite misgivings on the part of the Volksbund. Pastor Eitel conferred with his friends in *Aktion Sühnezeichen* who had experience in Poland, and they disagreed with Boehlke’s depiction of the Poles and “did not find the Poles as dogmatic as Boehlke argued.”⁴³⁶ In their experience, the thirty years since the end of the war and a new post war generation in Poland made German-Polish reconciliation possible, as long as Germans accepted the status quo of the Oder-Neisse border. They also believed that it will eventually come to an agreement with Poland over the war graves, “but it remained an open question who will be able to take part in the work.”⁴³⁷

The commemorative approaches of the Volksbund and the ASZ were too different to reconcile. Bruno Dierke’s project with the Lutheran church fizzled out by May 1977, as local Catholic officials in Łódź refused to sponsor the restoration of the German cemetery, possibly because the Lutheran church listed the Volksbund as its partner instead of the ASZ.⁴³⁸ The different experience of the ASZ in Poland came down to the overt reconciliatory tone with which they approached war time commemoration, and likely because they were associated

⁴³⁵ “Brief an OKR Krapp Kirchenkanzlei der EKD Hannover von Hans-Kurt Boehlke AFD den 13.01.1977, betr. Würdige Herrichtung von Grablagen von Gefallenen in der VR Polen, Bezug das Schreiben vom 05.01.1977,“ EZA 2/17671.

⁴³⁶ “Brief an OKR Krapp von Kirchenrat Fritz Eitel den 07.03.1977, betr. Würdige Herrichtung von Grablagen von Gefallenen in der VR Polen, Bezug Ihr Schreiben vom 03.02.1977,“ EZA 2/17671.

⁴³⁷ “Brief an OKR Krapp von Kirchenrat Fritz Eitel den 07.03.1977, betr. Würdige Herrichtung von Grablagen von Gefallenen in der VR Polen, Bezug Ihr Schreiben vom 03.02.1977,“ EZA 2/17671.

⁴³⁸ “Brief an OKR Krapp (probably from Fritz Eitel) den 05.05.1977, betr. Würdige Herrichtung von Grablagen von Gefallenen in der VR Polen, Bezug Ihre Schreiben vom 06.01 sowie vom 03.02, unser Schreiben vom 14.02.1977,“ EZA 2/17671.

with more left-wing positions. The Volksbund would have likely been successful if they had sought out the ASZ as an intermediary – or if the Lutheran Church had just chosen the ASZ as a partner in Poland. A partnership between the The Volksbund and ASZ remained out of the question. The Volksbund, as it had done in Western Europe, was committed to reconciliation on an equal basis between national commemorative cultures without the epithets of “criminals” or “perpetrators” being leveled against fallen German soldiers. Reconciliation efforts through the Volksbund would also have had to proceed without discussions around reparations, as was the case in Greece, Yugoslavia, and Romania. The one point that communist officials in Warsaw, Polish Catholics, and underground Polish nationalists could all agree on was that Germans – in particular West Germans – had to offer more than vague appeals to binational commemoration if reconciliation was the goal. This fact did not bode well for the Volksbund without a fundamental change to their engagement with Poland.

With the Volksbund’s efforts to secure German war graves in Poland once again stalled, another independent effort began to gain momentum in late 1979. A West German named Wolfgang Hash wrote to a small church-based peace initiative dedicated to German-Polish reconciliation called *Zeichen der Hoffnung/ Znadki Nadzei e.V.* (Signs of Hope) explaining his interest in preserving the final resting place of his father and 900 other Wehrmacht soldiers killed in March 1945 in the Opole Voivodeship of Southern Poland. He explained,

to this day it is not permitted to create and maintain the grave. Two years ago, when an old woman from the village wanted to put flowers on my father’s grave, she got into trouble with the Polish authorities. Why do Poles still not allow us to visit and care for the graves of our fathers who died there? This is certainly not a political but a purely humanitarian question. I mean, as long as we are not allowed to do this otherwise self-evident service of grave care, an honest reconciliation is not possible. Should hatred really go beyond the grave

after decades? Please also consider this problem in your talks with Poland. An example could really be set here.⁴³⁹

German Protestants from the Rhine-Main region and Frankfurt founded *Signs of Hope* in 1977. The organization intended to provide material and immaterial aid to the victims – former prisoners of German National Socialist concentration camps in Poland. Pastor Adam Malina of the Lutheran church in Hessen and Nassau stated at the founding "this initiative begins at a time when the wounds of the Second World War seemed incurable and there is a lack of willingness on the German side to grant official compensation to the Polish and other Eastern European victims of the Nazi era."⁴⁴⁰

Signs of Hope wrote back to Hasch only to say that its members had already made a great deal of effort in the question of the maintenance of German war graves, including in connection with the executive board of the Volksbund. "Although we know that there are cemeteries here and there, in our efforts we are repeatedly told that there is no point in constructing cemeteries so long after the war, which also evoked painful memories for the Polish population."⁴⁴¹ *Signs of Hope* recognized that many Poles did not want to see reminders of the German occupation that triggered painful memories. In a sense, grave erasure was permission for many post-war Poles to forget traumatic history. This avenue appeared to be another dead end, but Hasch also sought higher avenues of influence for his project concerning German war graves in Poland.

Wolfgang Hasch wrote to Chancellor Schmidt in August 1979 in advance of his upcoming summit with Polish Secretary General Edward Giereck. Hasch emphasized that although "economic and other current political issues will be in the foreground of the

⁴³⁹ "Brief von Wolfgang Hasch an Zeichen der Hoffnung/Znaki Nadzei e.V. Frankfurt am Main, 26.10.1979," EZA 6/4392.

⁴⁴⁰ <https://www.zentrum-oekumene.de/de/oekumene/aktuelles/detailseite/zeichen-der-hoffnung-znaki-nadzei-ehrunge-fuer-aussoehnungsarbeit>, accessed 07/28/2023

⁴⁴¹ "Brief von Kirchenpräsident Helmut Hild an Wolfgang Hasch, den 11.02.1980," EZA 6/4392.

meeting,” no progress at all has been made with the war graves in Poland. Hasch explained further,

to this day it is impossible for us to visit and care for the graves of our fathers who fell in the East. Psychological resistance in the local population is cited as the reason for the Polish attitude. However, such an answer can no longer satisfy. A few years ago, I looked for and found the mass grave in Upper Silesia where my father is buried with 900 comrades. During my visit to Poland, I experienced a lot of understanding and help for my concerns from the Polish population in particular. Dear Chancellor, please do your best to solve this problem during your visit to Poland. Many people are waiting for it. As long as we are not allowed to visit the graves of our fallen soldiers in Poland, there can be no talk of a normalization.⁴⁴²

Hasch justified the need to preserve war graves not as a means to adjudicate the crimes of his father’s generation and preserve his German military legacy, but to emphasize an emotive appeal to Poland for Germans to mourn. A reply came nearly a month later from the Chancellor’s office. Due to the short time available Chancellor Schmidt and Gierek focused on humanitarian problems, such as family reunification issues for Poles who settled in Western Europe and postponed the discussion of war grave maintenance until a later date. The letter included a note of cautious optimism. “So far, grave care has only been achieved in isolated cases...a solution to this problem will only be possible in connection with the ongoing normalization of our relations with Poland.”⁴⁴³ Initiatives from both private and religious organizations had failed to make significant progress on the issue. Chancellor Schmidt recognized that the war graves question with Poland was on hold until full normalization of relations with Poland, likely referring to the final settlement regarding the Oder-Neisse line. The war graves question could only be resolved in Poland with a final recognition of Poland’s post-1945 borders.

⁴⁴² Letter from Wolfgang Hasch to Chancellor Schmidt, 09.08.1979, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁴³ Letter from the Office of the Chancellery signed Jess, to Wolfgang Hasch, 05.09.1979, BArch B 136/16494.

The First Breakthrough with the Soviets

Chancellor Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* yielded the first breakthrough with the Soviet Union in the early 1970s. Willy Brandt and his Foreign Minister Walter Scheel signed the Treaty of Moscow in the Kremlin on August 21, 1970. This treaty intended to ease tensions by accepting the status quo of German division and the Oder-Neisse border with Poland without recognizing it. The treaty provided the basis for an easing of geo-strategic tensions and increased cultural and economic relations in the near future. But the treaty required final ratification from the West German parliament and seemed to be dragging its feet to do so. By March of 1972, the West German Bundestag had still not ratified the treaty, which began to make both the Kremlin and Willy Brandt anxious. It was in this context that the Soviet ambassador to West Germany, Valentin Falin, expressed interest in meeting Volksbund President Willi Thiele to discuss the war graves question. Falin made the request during a conversation in March 1972 with SPD parliamentarian Hans-Jürgen Junghans, a politician with connections to the German steel industry and major spokesman for German labor within the SPD. As a member of the SPD and spokesman for German industrial labor, Junghans was a much more amenable interlocutor for the Soviets than a right-wing, German nationalist as was always the case in the attempts of the foreign office and Volksbund in the 1950s and 60s. In a communication from the office of the Chancellery and the Undersecretary of the Foreign office reporting on the development, the latter wrote across the bottom "inform Professor Thiele, ask him to make an appointment with Ambassador Falin; discuss the draft of a press release with Professor Thiele, coordinate the draft with the Soviet embassy; leave the journalistic exploitation to the Volksbund, i.e. do nothing on the part of the government (but make sure that it takes place!)."⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴⁴ Letter from Office of the Chancellery to Undersecretary of the Foreign Office, 17.03.1972, BArch B 136/5068, 037.

Ratification of the Treaty of Moscow was crucial to the success of *Neue Ostpolitik*. Without it, no other Eastern bloc country would have been willing to pursue normalization of relations with West Germany unless Moscow did it first. This meeting was likely a key element to bring about the ratification. The federal government wanted to orchestrate the logistics of the meeting from behind the scenes, but ultimately intended the Volksbund President to be the public face of the meeting with ambassador Falin. Much like during the negotiations with Yugoslavia – and the Red Cross for Czechoslovakia and Hungary – the Volksbund as a private organization could not make any promises beyond the immediate issues of accessing and caring for German war graves in the Soviet Union. The optics of the meeting could help limit any attempts on the part of the Soviet ambassador to push other political issues the Volksbund would have no authority to negotiate – especially given the long tense months during which the Moscow treaty waited for ratification.

The meeting took place on April 17, 1972, and the Volksbund provided minutes of the meeting to both the office of the Chancellery and the Foreign Office. The report opened “Willi Thiele stressed that the goal was to find a satisfactory solution to the war graves issue in the Soviet Union as well. For example, it would be an impressive gesture towards the relatives if it were possible to obtain certainty about the names of the war dead in two war cemeteries near Moscow, Krasnogorsk and Ljublino. Surely the names must be known.”⁴⁴⁵ POW reports following their return to West Germany in 1955 had suggested the location of several German POW cemeteries in the Soviet Union, the existence and size of which, along with the identities of the interred, remained unknown. Ambassador Falin explained that there were certainly documents about these two cemeteries, since according to his information

⁴⁴⁵ “Vermerk: Gespräch des Präsidenten des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Herrn Prof. Dr. Thiele mit dem Botschafter der UdSSR Falin am 17. April 1972,“ BArch B 136/5068, 054.

deceased prisoners of war were buried there. In this case, the dead would certainly have been registered. Falin then replied according to the transcript,

It will certainly be possible to make these documents available. Certainly, however, this is not the decisive question. The relatives would then like to visit the cemeteries. The issue of maintaining the German cemeteries in the USSR is the greatest problem. In this connection one has to consider the situation of the Soviet population. Since there was no individual burial and grave marking of Soviet dead, there was not much understanding of a cemetery design as in western countries, in Scandinavia and elsewhere. Incidentally, even today the enormous number of 20 million fallen Soviet soldiers cannot be left unconsidered.⁴⁴⁶

For most of the Cold War era, few had any idea where these were located nor if they were interred individually or in unmarked mass graves. Now that ambassador Falin confirmed the existence of two locations so close to the capitol, this raised many questions within the Volksbund:

Why should the Soviets have gone to such lengths to cover up the facts? Both cemeteries have individual graves. This is in contradiction to numerous reports of returnees, who only report burials in mass graves. They also reported the destruction or erasure of cemeteries erected by Wehrmacht units in places such as Riga, Stalino, Dnipropetrovsk, and many other cities. The graves laid out during the war are also not unknown to the SU. The material that came into Soviet possession exactly shows the location of the cemeteries and the number of burials.⁴⁴⁷

The Soviet Union created numerous cemeteries for its own fallen soldiers on its own territory, but also for Axis soldiers – German, Hungarian, Italian, Romanian - who died between 1943 and 1944 on Soviet territory and POWs of these respective countries – but they were all equally modest. Soviet officials had placed more emphasis on ensuring the mass graves of fallen Red Army soldiers received grandiose monuments abroad, such as in Treptower park in Berlin, to project Soviet power. This commemorative policy of Moscow was probably the most important argument against the creation new memorials for German

⁴⁴⁶ “Vermerk: Gespräch des Präsidenten des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Herrn Prof. Dr. Thiele mit dem Botschafter der UdSSR Falin am 17. April 1972,“ BArch B 136/5068, 054.

⁴⁴⁷ “Die Versorgung der deutschen Soldatengräber in der Sowjetunion durch die Deutsche Wehrmacht,“ compiled for the Volksbund by Wilhelm Heinrich Refarat Ost 1982, Volksbund Archive A 100-1053.

soldiers' graves on Soviet territory because they received more or less the same attention as their own fallen – ie. very little. From the Soviet perspective - why should invaders and murderers receive more attention? In addition, it was still common for Soviet citizens, particularly Russians, to speak of the German Wehrmacht or the German soldiers as “fascist hordes,” “invaders,” and “aggressors.” To deny their presence was to deny their right to be remembered. The Volksbund understood this as the most convenient way to evade the international obligation to preserve graves under the Geneva Convention.⁴⁴⁸

Back to the meeting, ambassador Falin then stated that after the ratification of the Moscow treaties he promised to speak to the highest personalities in his country about the question of the German war graves in the Soviet Union, adding that “the time has come to look at this question from a new perspective and to look for solutions.” Falin considered the creation of several central cemeteries, styled in the western pattern, to be very problematic due to the maintenance that is probably unfeasible in practice. However, he could imagine that the fallen German soldiers would be interred together in one place in the Soviet Union. It could be in the Stalingrad area, in the Moscow area, or elsewhere. When asked by Thiele if he thought it possible to provide the two cemeteries and other burial sites he had already mentioned with notices and commemorative plaques, Ambassador Falin answered in principle “Yes. However, one has to think very carefully about the form and especially the text of inscriptions. It is very important that such inscriptions express that the soldiers died without knowing why.” The dead at Ljublino and Krasnogorsk were exclusively POWs who died in Soviet custody – 672 individuals out of the 1.1 million who died in the Gulags. Bringing attention to that point was out of the question for the Soviet government. Thiele then raised the question of whether the Volksbund should expect the Ambassador of the

⁴⁴⁸ “Die Versorgung der deutschen Soldatengräber in der Sowjetunion durch die Deutsche Wehrmacht,” compiled for the Volksbund by Wilhelm Heinrich Refarat Ost 1982, Volksbund Archive A 100-1053.

Soviet Union – like his colleagues from all other countries – to take part in the *Volkstrauertag* event in Bonn in the future. Thiele interestingly described the event as “not just for the German dead, but rather for the dead of all countries that were involved in the last war.”⁴⁴⁹ On this question, the Ambassador said he would consider it and offered the Volksbund and its representatives to take part in the laying of wreaths in the Soviet cemeteries in the Federal Republic on the commemoration days in the Soviet Union. Falin concluded the meeting by warning that “all the problems that we have now discussed can only be dealt with more intensively after the Bundestag has accepted the treaties with the East. Although I do not want to link the will to care for the war graves with this political question, the acceptance of the treaties would create a new situation that would be of interest to us.”⁴⁵⁰ The West German Bundestag ratified the Treaty of Moscow on June 3, 1972, which ensured the promises made by both Thiele and Falin in April could be honored.

The Volksbund and the federal government considered the meeting a success just in the fact that the Soviets were willing to seriously discuss the war graves issue for the first time. But they were still a long way off from gaining the grave access and protections they sought. In a letter from November 20, 1972, Willie Thiele congratulated Chancellor Brandt on an electoral victory stating, “through the continuation of the policy of the social-liberal coalition, essential prerequisites will continue to be created for the Volksbund to establish contacts with the states of the East or to intensify existing ones. Only in this way will it be possible to deal with the problem of the graves in the East in such a way that at least some wishes can be realized.” Ambassador Falin reassured Thiele that in the foreseeable future the

⁴⁴⁹ “Vermerk: Gespräch des Präsidenten des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Herrn Prof. Dr. Thiele mit dem Botschafter der UdSSR Falin am 17. April 1972,“ BArch B 136/5068, 054-6.

⁴⁵⁰ “Vermerk: Gespräch des Präsidenten des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Herrn Prof. Dr. Thiele mit dem Botschafter der UdSSR Falin am 17. April 1972,“ BArch B 136/5068, 054-6.

Ljublino and Krasnogorsk cemeteries could be visited by Germans and expressed his optimism for more concrete steps in the near future.⁴⁵¹

The opening of these graves sites to German tourists came in the mid-1970s. By 1975, ambassador Falin promised that the physical security of the graves at Ljublino and followed through with providing the lists of the dead at these two cemeteries. Families could travel individually to these two sites under the supervision of state guides. The conditions of the two cemeteries were far below German expectations, being mostly open, overgrown fields with a handful of dilapidated name plates, most of which were missing. But relatives could now at least visit the site where the remains of their loved ones now rested.⁴⁵² This development was crowned with Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's 1974 visit to Moscow and Federal President Walter Scheel's state visit in 1975, both of whom laid wreaths at the monument of the unknown soldier at the Kremlin and visited Ljublino and Krasnogorsk afterwards.

In October 1977, President Thiele informed Chancellor Helmut Schmidt that he had spoken with the General Consular of the Soviet Union in Hamburg, Valentin Koptelzvev, on October 6th and discussed the next questions regarding Germans War graves, specifically "to address other German military cemeteries in the same way." In their conversation, Consular General Koptelzvev made it clear that any further efforts could not proceed without the appropriate government support. He recommended that either he or Chancellor Schmidt bring the issue directly to Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev during his upcoming visit to Bonn. Koptelzvev added "that it would be better not to insist on declassifying several cemeteries. It would be expedient - and this would be more in line with possible action by the Russian authorities - to head for a third cemetery after Ljublino and Krasnogorsk and after a certain time to a fourth, etc."⁴⁵³ Since many of these German war cemeteries were near former

⁴⁵¹ Letter to Chancellor Brandt from Volksbund President Thiele, 20.11.1972, BArch B 136/5068, 094.

⁴⁵² "Vermerk: Einbeziehung der Frage der deutschen Soldatengräber in die politischen Gespräche und Abmachungen, die mit den Staaten des Ostens geführt" – Bundeskanzleramt 1975, BArch B 136/1694.

⁴⁵³ Letter from President Willi Thiele to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, 11.10.1977, BArch 136/16494.

GULAG sites remained sensitive to Soviet internal security services, such as the KGB and its predecessor the NKVD, Soviet officials considered these sites state secrets. Thiele then passed on some advice from Consul General Koptelzvev for the Chancellor in advance of his upcoming summit with Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev: “In the conversation between you, Chancellor, and Mr. Brezhnev, when these questions are discussed, Mr. Brezhnev must get involved. If Mr. Brezhnev really took up this topic, there would be a chance that this should have an impact on the Russian authorities.”⁴⁵⁴ The Minister of State at the Federal Chancellery, Hans-Jürgen Wischnewski, replied on behalf of the Chancellor, “of course, the Federal Chancellor will endeavor to introduce the subject of the German war graves in the Soviet Union into the talks with Secretary General Brezhnev during the planned visit of the Soviet head of state Brezhnev to the Federal Republic of Germany,” which occurred May 5, 1978 after several delays. Wischnewski assured the Volksbund that, “this problem is also of great concern to the Federal Chancellor.”⁴⁵⁵

In fall 1977, the Volksbund elected a new president after Thiele stepped down for health reasons, Josef Schneeberger, a fellow member of the SPD and the first Catholic to hold the position, continued Thiele’s efforts to open the East for the Volksbund. Schneeberger followed up with Chancellor Schmidt with this same plea in April 1978, on the eve of the summit. This time, Schneeberger made clear that there were at least 1.8 million Germans buried on Soviet territory, compared to Ljublino and Krasnogorsk where only a few hundred combined rested - the only sites the Soviets had opened for visitation and exchanged documents. Schneeberger recognized these as important steps, but emphasized how much work needed to be done and how important for these talks to occur at the highest level, citing

⁴⁵⁴ Letter from President Willi Thiele to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, 11.10.1977, BArch 136/16494.

⁴⁵⁵ Letter from Minister of State at the Federal Chancellery Hans-Jürgen Wischnewski to Volksbund President Thiele, 24.10.1977, BArch B 136/16494.

Thiele's suggestion from few months prior.⁴⁵⁶ The Chancellor's Chief of Staff Manfred Schüler replied in late May after the summit only to report, what was now obvious to the Volksbund - the Chancellor did not bring up the issue of war graves. Schüler claimed that Chancellor Schmidt believed that other themes, such as the emigration of Soviet citizens of German ethnicity from the Soviet Union within the framework of family reunification, were more likely to bear fruit than the issue of war graves.⁴⁵⁷

Two years later, in July 1980, during a critical state visit to Moscow, chancellor Schmidt finally brought the issue of German war graves to the forefront of his talks with Soviet premier Brezhnev. The timing was interesting considering this was at moment where many contemporaries saw the end of détente between the Eastern and Western Blocs. In December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, while NATO announced its double track decision that same month, whereby it offered mutual limitation on medium-range ballistic missiles while threatening to station more medium range nuclear weapons in Europe. Schmidt supported NATO's decision even as it divided his own party and eventually led to the collapse of his administration in 1982. The international press focused on this summit through the lens of the arms race in Europe and rising tensions. No one expected a breakthrough in this regard, but the West German press depicted the meeting more positively than Anglo-American news outlets, citing a "Soviet willingness to talk," and that "the ball is now in America's court" to return to the negotiating table.⁴⁵⁸ The American press, on the other hand, ran headlines such as "Schmidt's Moscow Trip Worries U.S." and "Schmidt and Brezhnev Talk at and Past Each Other."⁴⁵⁹ The difference in headlines was likely due to an American suspicion that West Germany would offer unilateral concessions to the Soviet

⁴⁵⁶ Letter from Volksbund President Josef Schneeberger to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, 20.04.1978, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁵⁷ Letter from Chief of the Office of the Chancellor Dr. Schüler to Volksbund President Josef Schneeberger, 18.05.1978. BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁵⁸ "Das lief in Moskau – Zucker," *Der Spiegel*, 06.07.1980, 28/1980.

⁴⁵⁹ *Washington Post*, June 30, 1980; *Christian Science Monitor*, July 2, 1980.

premier – a fear that did not manifest itself. The topic of war graves was never brought up in the press, but perhaps this was another reason why Schmidt and his diplomats saw the meeting positively. Schmidt’s chancellery presented a more promising and productive depiction of Schmidt and Brezhnev’s interaction.

Both Schmidt and Brezhnev fought on opposite sides of the Eastern Front, and press coverage of the meeting reported that the two talked about their experiences at the front and the need to avoid another European war. Building on this shared sentiment, Schmidt brought up the Volksbund’s role in caring for German war dead abroad and Brezhnev promised to ensure that the Soviet Red Cross would be authorized to issue an invitation to the Volksbund.⁴⁶⁰ The summit culminated in a televised wreath-laying by Chancellor Schmidt in Ljublino, which the Volksbund President Schneeberger described as being “watched by millions of Germans on television... a sign for countless bereaved relatives that our dead in the East are not forgotten.” Even though the main topics of the summit did not yield the concrete breakthroughs many hoped for, it still had profound symbolic meaning for many West Germans, especially in the Volksbund.

The Volksbund recognized that with Brezhnev’s mentioning of the Volksbund as an official partner to the Soviet Red Cross and Crescent, this was the breakthrough they needed.⁴⁶¹ Even if they could not access the vast majority, or any sites in the Soviet Union directly, the Red Cross could possibly do it for them. In December 1981, President Schneeberger traveled to Leningrad and Moscow to discuss the future care of German war graves with the Soviet Red Cross.⁴⁶² During this visit, the Soviet Red Cross revealed the location of two additional cemeteries of German POWs around Tambov, which relatives

⁴⁶⁰ Letter from the Minister of State to the Chancellor Gunter Huonker to Volksbund President Josef Schneeberger, 14.07.1980, BArch B 136/16494

⁴⁶¹ Letter from Volksbund President Helmut Schmidt to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, 24.07.1980, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁶² “Vermerk: Pflege der Kriegsgräber in der Sowjetunion,“ Referat 212 AA, 22.03.1982, BArch B 136/16494.

could soon visit. However, Schneeberger had to quickly temper his expectations. The Soviet Red Cross “also made it clear that, according to official opinion, the graves of German soldiers who died in action have not been preserved. Investigations are therefore as good as pointless.” The Soviet Red Cross officials also insisted that the Volksbund's wish to erect a memorial for all German war dead buried in the Soviet Union at the cemeteries near Moscow, first brought up during the Falin talks of 1972, had “no prospect of being realized in the near future.”⁴⁶³

During the meeting, Schneeberger shared documentation about maintenance of Soviet war graves in West Germany with the hopes of satisfying demands of reciprocity – but these only amounted to a few thousand total. Schneeberger then asked whether graves from the time of the fighting have survived. A Soviet official, Reshetov replied but avoided the question. He referred to the large number of graves of Soviet war dead in West Germany, about which the Soviet Union also wished information. He then explained the offer – the Soviet Red Cross, in cooperation with local authorities, would compile lists of the names of deceased German prisoners buried in cemeteries in Tambov, Morshansk and Kirsanov. When Schneeberger asked again whether wartime graves had been preserved, Reshetov said he was “absolutely certain that this was not the case.”⁴⁶⁴ The Volksbund handed over its own documentation on the location of graves of Wehrmacht soldiers in the Leningrad region with the request to check whether any of them had survived. They made sure photos with National Socialist emblems had previously been removed. Reshetov doubted that graves could be found but accepted the photos and documents anyway. Schneeberger then asked whether existing graves of prisoners had been preserved, mentioning 1.1 million German prisoners of war and civilian internees had died in the Soviet Union. At this, according to the Foreign

⁴⁶³ “Fernschreiben der AA Botschaft Moskau,” 22.03.1982, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁶⁴ “Fernschreiben der AA Botschaft Moskau,” 22.03.1982, BArch B 136/16494.

Office's report, Reshetov "vehemently rejected the term "civilian internees" – insisting "there were only prisoners of war in the Soviet Union."⁴⁶⁵

Finally, Schneeberger put forward the Volksbund's desire to erect a plaque in one of the prisoner cemeteries in Moscow to commemorate the 2.2 million German war dead buried in the Soviet Union. The inscription could simply read "In Memoriam." Reshetov did not reject this outright but insisted that it had little chance happening due to "psychological difficulties."⁴⁶⁶ An anecdote from another Soviet official explained what they meant: "A city guide in Stalingrad, today's Volgograd, was asked by German journalists where the German soldiers' graves were. She is said to have summarily declared that there were no German soldiers' graves. The bodies of the aggressors were thrown into shell craters, which were then shoveled over."⁴⁶⁷ In the assessment of the West German embassy in Moscow, "the talks between the Volksbund, the Soviet Red Cross, and Soviet officials once again proved how sensitive and difficult the treatment of the issue of war graves in the Soviet Union still is. Under the given conditions, however, the outcome of the talks cannot be rated as negative."⁴⁶⁸ The Foreign Office in Bonn described Soviet officials as "repeatedly referring to the sufferings of the Soviet Union during World War II and at times emotionally and aggressively focused on issues of reciprocity."⁴⁶⁹ The Volksbund, since its leadership change in 1970, had attempted to build a common European approach to the war dead and one that provided healing to families in West (and clandestinely in East) Germany yet ignored Soviet claims to suffering because of the suffering by German refugees and POWs at the hands of the Red Army.

⁴⁶⁵ "Fernschreiben der AA Botschaft Moskau," 22.03.1982, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁶⁶ The term used by the Foreign Office observers in their transcript.

⁴⁶⁷ "Rede Arbeitgemeinschaft I der Verbände für DDR Hilfe," 23.01.1979, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁶⁸ "Fernschreiben der AA Botschaft Moskau," 22.03.1982, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁶⁹ "Fernschreiben der AA Botschaft Moskau," 22.03.1982, BArch B 136/16494.

Yet, the Soviet Red Cross had reason enough to speak for the feelings and sensitivities of the Soviet people. The Volksbund executive board interpreted the modest or even neglected state of Soviet war graves – and war graves in general – within the Soviet Union as proof of a lack of interest in commemoration among the peoples of the Soviet Union. This assumption could not have been further from reality. Starting at the very end of the war, Red Army veterans, surviving relatives of the deceased and missing, and other patriotic citizens by the hundreds of thousands petitioned their local Soviets at the oblast and republic level to improve conditions and create worthy sites of remembrance for the millions of war graves.⁴⁷⁰ The Soviet government failed during both Stalinist and post-Stalin years to mobilize the resources to fulfill these requests. The state's failure was partially due to other commemorative goals of the Soviet regime taking precedent – the Stalinist cult up until 1953, refurbishing memorial complexes of city centers post-Stalin, and too little funds and resources for such a massive task.⁴⁷¹ Even in major cities, the memorialization efforts were curtailed. In Leningrad, city planners decided to build two tranquil victory parks, the Moskovskii and Primorskii parks to return the city to its pre-war aesthetic, rather than massive memorial complexes to commemorate the three-year siege and remember the dead. Although some citizens welcomed the beautification, many perceived that they were constructed more to erase war damage and forget sites of painful memory, such as brick crematorium used to cremate the remains of thousands of Leningraders during the siege.⁴⁷² There simply were too many dead. Improvised and temporary memorials, such as flower bouquets, wreaths, hand carved stone or wooden memorials, and photos, placed by Red Army veterans' organizations, locals, surviving family members at thousands of burial sites left at the margins of Soviet society became the primary commemorative activities at these sites. On

⁴⁷⁰ Dale, "Remobilizing the Dead," 66.

⁴⁷¹ Dale, "Remobilizing the Dead," 68.

⁴⁷² Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1995: Myth, Memories, and Monuments*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 134-9.

May 9th victory day celebrations, or anniversaries of major battles, thousands made pilgrimages to these sites, despite their modest or dilapidated state.⁴⁷³ Starting in the 1960s, the Soviet youth organization the Komsomol organized the first “search movements” (*poiskovoe dvizhenie*) for Soviet youth to voluntarily search for missing human remains and provide worthy reburials.⁴⁷⁴ Since 1990, more informal and grassroots organizations with names such as “The Search” (*Poisk*) or “The Searchers” (*Iskateli*) formed every Summer.⁴⁷⁵ Volksbund and West German state sources do not reflect any understanding of this long established commemorative phenomenon among the Soviet peoples since 1945, nor any awareness of its context due to state failures among the Volksbund or its representatives. One can begin to understand why the Soviet people might not have been so pleased if nearby burial sites with German war dead were to suddenly receive spiffy new memorials, while Soviet war graves remained neglected by the Soviet state.

The issue of German war graves clearly remained fraught despite some small steps toward mutual recognition. The Foreign Office in Bonn concluded in a separate assessment disparagingly, “The main goal of the talks could hardly be concrete results, but rather the initiation and continuation of a dialogue that could then bring results later.”⁴⁷⁶ Despite the emotional outbursts and sensitivity towards topics of German POW and civilian deaths on Soviet territory, the promise of visiting the cemeteries in the Tambov region was not taken off the table.⁴⁷⁷ These exchanges between the Volksbund and Soviet interlocutors demonstrated a willingness to finally have a dialogue on the issue of war graves and their commemoration throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, even as tensions between the

⁴⁷³ Dale, “Remobilizing the Dead,” 69.

⁴⁷⁴ Dale, “Remobilizing the Dead,” 72.

⁴⁷⁵ Nina Tumarkin, *The Living & the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994, 25.

⁴⁷⁶ “Vermerk: Pflege der Kriegsgräber in der Sowjetunion,” Referat 212 AA, 22.03.1982, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁷⁷ “Fernschreiben der AA Botschaft Moskau,” 22.03.1982, BArch B 136/16494.

Superpowers resumed. Yet, the topic remained too political and emotionally fraught for larger displays of reconciliation between the Volksbund and Soviet Red Cross and Crescent.

“The Fate of the Dead Depends on the Fate of the Living” – Romania and Yugoslavia

During this later period of the Cold War, the Volksbund made some additional breakthroughs with other states of the Eastern Bloc. Between January 29th and February 1st, 1974, negotiations took place in Bucharest between the delegation of the Volksbund headed by President Thiele and the delegation of the Romanian Red Cross headed by President Burca concerning the German war graves in Romania. A representative of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, embassy counselor Sandu, also took part. The Romanian side explained its conditions for a contract between the Romanian Red Cross and the Volksbund: the Red Cross would identify all German war dead from the First and Second World War – an estimated 110,000 graves total - provide the cemeteries and graves with wreaths when requested, ensure their protection and maintenance, the resulting costs of which were to be borne by the Volksbund, and to maintain strict confidentiality of this agreement “to avoid intervention from East Germany.” The Volksbund approved of this arrangement, granted that its representatives visit the sites at least on an individual basis, and promoted this as a model agreement for other Eastern Bloc countries.⁴⁷⁸

However, the meeting did not go without controversy. Both President Burca and Ambassador Sandu asked President Thiele multiple times during the negotiations to support the Romanian claim for reparations with the government in Bonn. The two claimed that they “did not want to create a link between the two questions,” such as the Yugoslavs and Greeks had tried before, “but on the other hand emphasized that an unfavorable voice could arise because of the war graves regulation in the Romanian population.” Essentially, they wanted

⁴⁷⁸ “Fernschreiben des AAs Botschaft in Bukarest über Verhandlungen des Volksbundes mit dem Rumänischen Roten Kreuz,” 06.02.1974, BArch B 136/16494.

to show that were getting something for their people out of the agreement. To not try may become politically problematic as Romanians noticed the reburial and memorialization effort of German graves while Romanian war graves remained modest. President Thiele explained to President Burca that he could relay the Romanian wishes to the government in Bonn, but emphasized his capabilities were limited. Ambassador Sandu informed President Thiele that Bonn had already answered the Romanian petition several times, clearly and unequivocally stating that reparations in Romania were out of the question.⁴⁷⁹

As they did with most of these exchanges in the East, the Foreign Office provided its own assessment of the meeting.

We will have to wait and see whether the Romanians will continue to link the further progress of the negotiations and in particular the start of the internally promised work on the war graves question to reparations in the future, or whether they will ultimately settle for the expected, not inconsiderable, foreign currency earnings for their work on the war graves and only use the mention of reparations in this context to remind us that the Romanian demands for reparations are not off the table.⁴⁸⁰

Perhaps the most interesting revelation for the Foreign Office was that the “Romanians have asked for strict confidentiality in order, as they have indicated, to avoid intervention by East Germany.”⁴⁸¹

Socialist unity did not seem to extend to the question of war graves, but this is not completely surprising. East Germany was in some ways a pariah in the Eastern bloc. It was not a united nation state and struggled to define itself as a unique East German identity distinct from that of West Germany. Moreover, in pursuit of distinct national communisms in the post-Stalinist era, the regimes of the Warsaw pact nations often leaned into broad anti-German rhetoric, making little effort to promote East Germany as the “good Germany”

⁴⁷⁹ “Fernschreiben des AAs Botschaft in Bukarest über Verhandlungen des Volksbundes mit dem Rumänischen Roten Kreuz,” 06.02.1974, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁸⁰ “Fernschreiben des AAs Botschaft in Bukarest über Verhandlungen des Volksbundes mit dem Rumänischen Roten Kreuz,” 06.02.1974, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁸¹ “Fernschreiben des AAs Botschaft in Bukarest über Verhandlungen des Volksbundes mit dem Rumänischen Roten Kreuz,” 06.02.1974, BArch B 136/16494.

among their citizens.⁴⁸² But considering that East Germany refused to address this issue whereas the economically wealthy West Germany repeatedly expressed interest through the Volksbund, the Romanian decision also made some practical sense. This agreement could have been a means to bring in desperately needed foreign capital for Romania's stagnant economy, especially if it led to an off-chance agreement regarding reparations.⁴⁸³

However, the Romanian government's claim to reparations was not the strongest. Romania's role during the Second World War was complicated. Its pre-war constitutional monarchy tried to remain neutral after Hitler's invasions of Poland and France, but a Fascist coup in September 1940 led Romania into an alliance with the Nazis. Romania's armies contributed both considerable manpower and resources to the invasion of the Soviet Union. Romania's Fascist Iron Guard committed many atrocities against tens of thousands of Jews, Roma and Sinti, and other ethnicities of the Soviet Union in collaboration with the Nazis. Allied air raids hit Romanian cities in 1943, from which Romania suffered most of its structural damage. King Michael of Romania led a counter coup in August 1944, supported by the Allies, and the Soviet invasion followed shortly thereafter. The Romanian army joined the Red Army, which, as punishment for Romania's role in operation Barbarossa, placed all Romanian units on the front line as vanguard units until the end of the war, where they suffered heavy losses. Also in 1944, Hungarian fascists killed hundreds of ethnic Romanians in Transylvania in a failed attempt to seize the long-disputed territory. By 1945, Romania had lost 300,000 soldiers, half of these losses in the final year alone, and 469,000 civilians, due to atrocities of the fascist Iron Guard against Jews, Roma, and Hungarian nationals and allied bombing raids. These 769,000 losses were against a pre-war population of 13 million – a considerable five percent loss of its population. Like Finland, Romania had to pay the Soviet

⁴⁸² John Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 518.

⁴⁸³ "Fernschreiben des AAs Botschaft in Bukarest über Verhandlungen des Volksbundes mit dem Rumänischen Roten Kreuz," 06.02.1974, BArch B 136/16494.

Union 300 million dollars in reparations for its role in Operation Barbarossa but were recognized for having ended the war on the side of the allies. Most of the death and destruction brought to Romania was from allied bombing raids, civil war, and the ethnic cleansing of Jews, Roma, and Sinti by Romanian fascists. Germany played a more of an indirect role in these events.

Romania's commemoration of the Second World War was just as complex and chaotic as its war time experience. Romania's first communist regime attempted to explain Romania's chaotic experience and high losses within the Marxist worldview. According to the new regime in 1946, "international bankers and industrialists" manipulated the events of the war to punish and weaken the Romania's workers and peasants, and then collaborated with Horthyist Hungarians and Nazis to "kill Jews as a diversion from these excesses," rather than the goal in of itself.⁴⁸⁴ The intention was to present Romanians as victims who were then saved by the Red Army and Romanian communists. The attempt failed to convince most Romanians that the Soviets were their liberators, but they latched onto the idea that they were victims of the war. In 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu became the new Romanian premier and attempted to emphasize national suffering of the Romanian people at the hands of foreigners, in particular Hungarian fascists.⁴⁸⁵ Where his predecessors minimized Romania's role in the Holocaust and other wartime atrocities, Ceaușescu's regime actively covered it up to further the commemorative narrative of Romanian victimization by Hungarian fascists. However, Hungary was now a Warsaw Pact ally under a fellow communist regime. Ceaușescu could not request reparations from a fellow socialist state. A wealthy capitalist country and successor state to the Nazis – ie. West Germany – was a possible option. After all, as

⁴⁸⁴ Maria Bucur, "Chapter 5: War Commemorations and State Propaganda under Dictatorship: From the Crusade against Bolshevism to Ceaușescu's Cult of Personality, 1940–1989." In *Heroes and Victims: Remembering War in Twentieth-Century Romania*. Indiana-Michigan Series in Russian and East European Studies. Indiana University Press, 2009), 155-60.

⁴⁸⁵ Bucur, "War Commemorations and State Propaganda under Dictatorship," 183-7.

Ceaușescu likely reasoned, Horthy was the junior partner to the Nazi state – perhaps the West Germans should pay.

Being that West Germany repeatedly rejected both Yugoslav and Greek reparation claims only a few years prior, with the latter having the strongest claim of the three in addition to being a NATO ally, Romania's claim had little chance. Romanian Red Cross President Burca claimed 155,000 Romanian would somehow be eligible for compensation. To whom he exactly was exactly referring is uncertain. When President Burca asked Willi Thiele for support with this problem, President Thiele assured Burca that he would support the question of reparations as far as he could. Only the Bundestag and the Federal Government in Bonn could decide that. Thiele promised to present the request of the Red Cross at a suitable point and “point out how important this question is considered by Romania and what consideration must be given to public opinion there if German war graves are to be prepared.”⁴⁸⁶

As anticipated, Chancellor Brandt rejected the Romanian plea for reparations on similar grounds as with Greece and Yugoslavia. The Volksbund sent a transcript of its meeting with the Romanian officials to Chancellor Brandt. On February 19, Brandt wrote to Willi Thiele on the Romanian attempt to tie the care of war graves with reparations, stating,

In my view, the question of war graves is a purely humanitarian concern, the settlement of which cannot be made dependent on the fulfillment of material counterclaims. We have also rejected such a link in relation to other states. For fundamental reasons, we cannot respond to Romanian demands for compensation, just as we cannot respond to those of other Eastern European countries. I would therefore be grateful if you would not leave your Romanian interlocutors in doubt about this and would ask them to conduct the talks only within the framework you have envisaged.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁶ “Niederschfit über die Besprechungen des Volksbundes und Rumänischen Roten Kreuzes 30.01-01.02.1974 in Bukarest,” BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁸⁷ Letter from Chancellor Brandt to Volksbund President Thiele 05.04.1974, BArch B 136/16494.

The Romanian government brought up its claims for reparations again in December 1977 after it had followed through on its promises concerning the care of German war graves, but the West German embassy in Bucharest repeated the federal government's rejection of any attempt to connect the care of war graves with reparations.⁴⁸⁸

Negotiations with Yugoslavia also continued into the 1970s. Despite the breakthrough Chancellor Brandt achieved with Marshall Tito in decoupling reparations with the care of German war graves, Yugoslavia still proved difficult for the Volksbund. Just a few months after Willy Brandt's meeting with Marshall Tito in April 1973, President Thiele forwarded the Chancellor a summary of a conversation between a Volksbund delegate and Yugoslav Ambassador to West Germany Budimir Lončar, adding "the issue of reparations seems to still play a critical role."⁴⁸⁹ During the interaction, Ambassador Lončar recognized the progress in bringing Yugoslavia and West Germany diplomatically and economically closer. He then added that there were still difficulties, such as the "fact that the graves of the Yugoslav partisans could not yet be put in order for material reasons". Lončar gave a personal example. His father-in-law, a high-ranking civil servant, died as a partisan. Lončar fought as a partisan himself during the war. He explained,

For 30 years, his mother-in-law has been trying to keep his remains. The costs for this amount to 2.5 million dinars or 4000 marks. She does not have this money, and not even her son-in-law, the ambassador, could advance her this amount. Now you have to realize that many people in Yugoslavia are like my mother-in-law. How should it be made clear to these people that the German military cemeteries should now be put in order?⁴⁹⁰

Lončar believed that German soldiers' graves had a right to be preserved, but only within the framework he outlined – first the Yugoslav people, then German soldiers. Lončar then added poetically, "the fate of the dead depends on the fate of the living" and asked for patience on

⁴⁸⁸ Internal Report of the Foreign Office Bonn, 09.12.1977, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁸⁹ Letter from Volksbund President Thiele to Chancellor Brandt 03.08.1973, BArch B 136/5068, 173.

⁴⁹⁰ "Vermerk," BArch B 136/5068, 174.

the part of the Volksbund.⁴⁹¹ Lončar's reasoning was similar to what the Volksbund later experienced with the Soviet Red Cross in 1980.

In an internal report from the Foreign Office in Bonn, officials noted a “great reluctance for domestic political reasons: the establishment of German military cemeteries would make the population aware that partisan graves are not maintained.”⁴⁹² In June 1977, Chancellor Schmidt wrote President Thiele after his meeting with Marshall Tito in Belgrade explaining,

President Tito made it clear to me that you would be welcome to an initial official contact meeting, for which you would be nominated a competent Yugoslavian interlocutor. At the same time, President Tito pointed out that the war graves issue could only be resolved gradually and very cautiously because of the strong emotions still prevailing in Yugoslavia and asked that the complex not be given too much publicity.⁴⁹³

Yugoslav commemorative policy, like most other socialist countries of Eastern Europe, emphasized the memory of communist partisans but this only represented a fraction of the war time experience. Nazi and Italo-Fascist occupiers during the war exploited ethnic tensions between Catholic Slovenes and Croats, Orthodox Serbs, Muslim Bosnians, and Albanians – while targeting Jews and Roma – to divert resistance efforts away from their forces. Many communities across wartime Yugoslavia suffered from inter-ethnic conflict and ethnic cleansing. Tito's communist regime actively suppressed these memories to maintain inter-ethnic cohesion. Ethnonationalist grave and memorial sites, such as those of Croat Ustašes or Serbian Chetniks perpetrators or their victims, remained neglected.⁴⁹⁴ Even graves of Communist partisans remained either neglected or modest, with the commemorative emphasis – similar to the Soviet Union – on Tito's personality cult and urban

⁴⁹¹ “Vermerk,” BArch B 136/5068, 174.

⁴⁹² Report to Chief of Chancellory and Chancellor Schmidt from Referat 213 Oldenkott, 14.06.1976, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁹³ Letter from Chancellor Schmidt to Volksbund President Thiele 01.07.1977, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁹⁴ See: Max Berholtz, “Sudden Nationhood,” in *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*, (Cornell University Press, 2016), 267-96.

memorialization efforts. Aware of this context, Tito did not want to provoke nationalist sentiments by publicly supporting the Volksbund's efforts, hence his request for discretion and to push it through his government as soon as possible.

During the next round of negotiations between the Volksbund and Yugoslavia in September 1977, President Thiele met with, Gavro Altman, a longtime advisor to Josip Tito, the State Secretary of the Federal Committee for Veterans Affairs and representatives of the Foreign Ministry. Altman declared himself and his government ready to name the Volksbund an official partner and a Yugoslavian veteran's organization as its partner. The representatives of the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry spoke out against this, to Altman's visible displeasure as recorded in the transcript, and tried again to establish a link between the maintenance of war graves and the general development of German-Yugoslav relations in other areas - terrorism, the spread of neo-Nazi groups, and more favorable terms for Yugoslav guest workers in West Germany. Altman ignored their protests and pressed ahead with the agreement with the Volksbund, charged to settle the issue from Tito himself. This cleared the way for expanded access to cemeteries and gravesites without greater concessions.⁴⁹⁵

Unlike in Western Europe where the Volksbund achieved reconciliation with mostly conservative like-minded-organizations who had at least some popular mandate from the people, such as in Greece and France, reconciliation with the peoples of Eastern Europe was a top-down affair. The Volksbund attempted reconciliation at the local level in its early attempts in Slovenia and Croatia, as outlined in the previous chapter, but Yugoslavia's authoritarian structures rendered this avenue closed. Tito pushed for some concessions to boost Yugoslavia's economy in the short term, but not even most of his own senior officials felt enough had been done to secure Yugoslav war graves to warrant such an agreement with

⁴⁹⁵ "Fernschreiben des AAs Botschaft in Belgrad an AA in Bonn," 15.09.1977, BArch B 136/16494.

West Germany. The same pattern occurred in Romania, albeit Romanian demands for reparations were on shakier ground. As the Volksbund and the Foreign Office in Bonn had to tailor their approach to address the war graves question with Eastern European state, a common pattern emerged that favored more authoritarian forms of reconciliation than democratic ones. Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* may have opened the door to solve the war graves question government to government but did little to facilitate meaningful reconciliation people to people. This will be furthered explored in the next chapter in the cases of Poland and the Soviet Union between 1982 and 1992.

Conclusion – A Reconciliation from Above?

In the early years of the Volksbund's attempt to gain access to millions of German war graves across Eastern Europe, the organization feared that these graves were as good as lost. This was partially due to how the annihilationist war in the East had been fought and imagined. The expulsion of Germans from the East, combined with the battlefield defeat of the Wehrmacht and implicit recognition of the Nazis' genocidal intentions in Eastern Europe, created the Volksbund's belief that the peoples of Eastern Europe would erase these graves outright. Long standing cultural prejudices against Slavic peoples also played a role as seen in the comments of some high-ranking members of the Volksbund. A partial erasure of German war graves along the Eastern Front did occur do to the highly mobile nature of the fighting, causing some to simply become lost, with some cases of Red Army units using grave erasure as an act of revenge. But this largely ceased after 1945.

Even during the tensest moments of the Cold War, the governments of the Eastern Bloc did not pursue a policy of grave erasure, but rather left them alone for the most part – neither actively destroying nor preserving them. They had their own commemorative interests to pursue. It is possible that the governments of Eastern Europe saw the diplomatic value of these graves, and perceived their continued existence, even in a dilapidated state, as a

potential bargaining chip. This played out during *détente* as access to German war graves was bargained against reparations or other economic privileges, to varying degrees of success. West Germany never offered reparations in return for war grave protection, using appeals to the Geneva conventions to shut down attempts to tie the two together. Economic investment, on the other hand, was never off the table, as was the case in Yugoslavia, Romania, and to some degree the Soviet Union. East Germany was an exception in its dedicated position to ignore the diplomatic potential of the German war graves on its territory.

It is also noteworthy to analyze the role that the depiction of emotions played in these interactions between Volksbund officials and their Eastern European counterparts. In every one of these negotiations, both the Volksbund and foreign analysts consistently described their interlocutors as harboring “psychological resentments,” as “emotionally charged,” or their work facing “psychological hurdles” while depicting themselves as dispassionate and objective in these talks by default. Their use of the term “psychological” seems to be more along the lines of “pathological,” inferring some sort of irrational anti-German disorder among their former enemies, rather than recognizing that many still had personal and emotional scars from the crimes committed by the Nazis and were seeking justice, or at least reciprocity in securing the war graves of their own countrymen.

On the other hand, the leaders and representatives of these Eastern European states understood the emotional weight these talks had for their people and asked for discretion on the part of the Volksbund. They knew that their people would perceive these talks as giving more consideration to the dead of a former enemy than their own, much as Yugoslav ambassador Loncar depicted it. Even Yugoslav dictator Josip Tito admitted to this fact. Yet, sometimes private citizens took it upon themselves to care for these graves, as cases in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary indicate. These instances were too scattered to suggest widespread interest among the general populations of Eastern Europe for caring for

German war graves, but frequent enough to complicate the notion held by some members of the Volksbund and the Foreign Office in Bonn that no such empathy existed behind the Iron Curtain.

Chapter 6: Diverging Paths – the Volksbund’s Efforts in East and West Germany 1973-1982

The stabilization of East German state socialism under Eric Honecker and continued social and cultural liberalization under the administrations of chancellors Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt dramatically altered the political and cultural context under which the Volksbund operated. The stability brought to East German society by Erich Honecker’s replacement of Walter Ulbricht, and the Basic treaty of 1972 eroded both church and public interest in the Volksbund’s clandestine project through the Protestant Church of East Germany. State and local officials used this growing lack of interest as an opportunity to accelerate grave and memorial erasure of the Nazi era. A generational divide within the church between the older generation of church officials and the younger pastors looking to reconcile faith with state socialism divided the church and marginalized the Volksbund’s project and further. The division also contributed to difficulties experienced by the *Vertrauenspfarrer*.

In West Germany, Willi Thiele’s new direction for the Volksbund – the “all victims together” approach – or the ambiguous, pacifist commemoration of German soldiers, civilians, and victims of the Nazis together continued to attract more criticism than support from West German society. Under the chancellorship of Helmut Schmidt, the West German government began to distance itself from the Volksbund, which angered Willi Thiele and other Volksbund leaders. This continued alienation, along with the failure of Thiele and the West German government to achieve a breakthrough on the war graves question in East Germany and a closer relationship with religious conservatism set the stage for the Volksbund’s conservative base to take back the leadership by the start of Helmut Kohl’s chancellorship in 1982.

The War Graves Project in Honecker's East Germany

Efforts to solve the war grave question with East Germany took on a more official guise as negotiations for the Basic Treaty concluded in late 1972. A month before the official signing of the Basic treaty between West and East Germany in December 1972, Volksbund President Thiele wrote Chancellor Brandt's Minister for Inner-German Relations, Egon Franke, on the topic of German war graves on the territory of East Germany. He cited the estimated 172,000 German war graves of the Second World War, 110,000 of which are known by name, and asked "I hope that after the Basic Treaty with the GDR has come into force, further agreements on humanitarian issues will be reached. I therefore urge the Federal Government to include the question of war graves in the GDR in such talks. The Volksbund is of course willing to help with its wealth of experience in this area."⁴⁹⁶ The letter made its rounds through the Ministry of Inner German Relations, the Foreign Office, and finally the Office of the Chancellor, which replied to the Volksbund on November 29, stating "The Federal Government is convinced that the Basic Treaty with the GDR coming into effect will initiate a development which will also make it possible to gradually come closer to a solution to the many humanitarian questions in divided Germany. The problem of war graves in the GDR, which you highlighted, will be kept in mind."⁴⁹⁷

Despite overtures from Erich Honecker and his representatives to open discussion on several inter-German issues, the East Germans refused to budge on war graves. The *Ständige Vertretung* (Permanent Representation) or StäV of West Germany in East Germany consistently asked its East German counterparts about opening access of German war graves on their territory to the Federal Republic vis a vis the Volksbund. It always received the same reply: "The East German government sees no need for special contacts on the question of war

⁴⁹⁶ Letter from Volksbund President Thiele to Minister for Inner-German Relations Egon Franke, 17.11.1972, BArch B 136/5068.

⁴⁹⁷ Letter from Office of the Chancellor to Volksbund Representative Dr. Gudenberg, 29.11.1972, BArch B 136/5068.

graves. East Germany is a member of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and adheres to the provisions established then.”⁴⁹⁸ The rest of the answer outlined how West German citizens could visit or request information through the Comecon office in Bonn and the German Red Cross. Much like how the Volksbund leadership maintained close ties with the Chancellery, the President, and Foreign Office, they also were in regular contact with the *Ständige Vertretung* (StäV). President Thiele claimed to have been given this answer by the leader of StäV, Secretary Günter Gaus.⁴⁹⁹

Détente may have eased East-West tensions in Europe and the Volksbund’s efforts in Eastern Europe, but the normalization of relations did not help its or the Berlin Bureau’s efforts in East Germany. The separation of the protestant churches between East and West Germany through the creation of the East German BEK in 1970 (*Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen*) undermined the Berlin Bureau’s institutional support. East German church officials seeking rapprochement with the SED now had much greater influence within the church now that West German church leaders no longer played a role in that question. The High Chancery of the BEK in Berlin remained a dependable ally for the Berlin Bureau to ensure their functions could continue— they had to literally share office space – but finding support elsewhere became more difficult.

The state used this opportunity to settle the unresolved issue of commemorating the Golm, where the Church dug in its heels fifteen years prior. At the 1973 meeting of the *Vertrauenspfarrer*, Dr. Achterberg reported that on the Golm the state had become quite active recently. He reported “They removed all crosses and are planning to erect a single, central monument,” adding that “a kind of legend has already developed around the Golm,” –

⁴⁹⁸ Letter to Minister for Inner German Relations Egon Franke from Volksbund President Thiele, 17.03.1976, BArch B 136/16494.

⁴⁹⁹ Letter to Minister for Inner German Relations Egon Franke from Volksbund President Thiele, 17.03.1976, BArch B 136/16494.

an allusion to the twenty years the church and state had struggled over commemorating the site.⁵⁰⁰ Interest on the part of the SED-controlled council in Wolgast to erect a memorial on the Golm on behalf of the state reemerged in the late 1960s. This state-led effort was to replace the church's commemorative influence on the Golm for good. The council settled on removing all individual crosses and grave markers in favor of constructing a single, common monument now common to the trend in Socialist commemoration in the Eastern Bloc. The council commissioned sculptor Wolfgang Eckhardt of Rostock for the design of the new monument in May 1969. Eckhardt planned a *Rundbau*, or cyclorama sort of structure with reliefs, described in the following: "The *Rundbau* is designed with a diameter of 12 meters and can be reached via 12 steps, which refer to 12 years of National Socialist dictatorship. The entrance and exit are very narrow and is intended to resemble a porthole. The paving installed in the inner courtyard represents the uncomfortable path that lasted 12 years. On the inside of the *Rundbau* there is a line of text from the former GDR national anthem by Johannes R. Becher. It reads "*So dass nie eine Mutter mehr ihrem Sohn beweint*" (That a mother will never weep for her son again). The cover plate in the middle of the rotunda read "*23.000 Toten des imperialistischen Krieges mahnen.*"⁵⁰¹ The relief, which was to be placed opposite the writing on the inside of the *Rundbau*, was never realized. In the design, Eckhardt attempted to symbolically present death and the re-blooming of life in the community. It is rumored that the artist was forbidden to attach the relief because of the radical pacifist statement. However, it is more likely that the *Rundbau* could not be completed due to a lack of funding. Eckhardt pushed for the completion of his full memorial design well into the 1980s to no avail. The existent memorial was constructed between Oct 1972 and Dec 1973

⁵⁰⁰ "Vermerk über die Jahreskonferenz der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge den 30.01.1973," EZA 110/115.

⁵⁰¹ Hanno Hüwo, Kamminke, "wird jede individuelle Grabgestaltung aufgehoben!" Die Geschichte des Golms 1945-1989, in *Der Golm und die Tragödie von Swinemünde. Kriegsgräber als Wegweiser zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft*, (Karlshagen, 2011), 400.

with the grave markers on the Golm being removed in the Summer of 1973.⁵⁰² This socialist era memorial exists to the current day, but the community of Wolgast has also been working with the Volksbund to restore the identities of the buried war dead since 1992.

The triumph of state influence on the Golm was just one incident in a larger trend in church and state relations. Despite the SED committing to its policy of tolerating the church, that did not mean pressure on the church to conform ceased – or that small victories of church autonomy at one moment would not be reversed later. The outcome of this two-decade long struggle suggests a competition over space between the Protestant Church and the East German state. The internal spaces of churches became refuges for opposition movements behind closed doors, while cemeteries as open public spaces may have represented a more obvious challenge to state authority.

Back at the 1973 meeting of the *Vertrauenspfarrer*, all reported the lack of available laborers and the lack of interest among young pastors and the youth in general, and that there continued to be a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of the state with the word “*Versöhnung*”– meaning reconciliation or atonement.⁵⁰³ The *Vertrauenspfarrer* suggested that they not abandon the concept of “Reconciliation over the Graves,” but try harder to reach the younger generations with overtly pacifist messaging. The minutes of the meetings of the *Vertrauenspfarrer* 1974-78 reveal the persistence of a dual problem: increased insistence from state officials to erase war graves and decreasing support among officials of the BEK. One pastor first reported in 1974 that the *Waldfriedhof* in Fürstenwalde was threatened to be leveled despite his protests to the local council about the “permanent right of rest.” In 1976, the same pastor reported that the *Waldfriedhof* has been temporarily saved thanks to the

⁵⁰² Hanno Hüwo, Kamminke, “wird jede individuelle Grabgestaltung aufgehoben!” Die Geschichte des Golms 1945-1989, in *Der Golm und die Tragödie von Swinemünde. Kriegsgräber als Wegweiser zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft*, (Karlshagen, 2011), 404-5.

⁵⁰³ The German word *Versöhnung* does not lend itself to differentiating between the more secular concept of “reconciliation” and the more religious “atonement,” as it works in English – the word can be used for both connotations depending on the context.

involvement of the church but indicated the need to intervene every year thereafter.⁵⁰⁴ Many others reported an increase rate of erasure in small localities as well as larger towns and cities – more than they could possibly keep up with. “Difficulties continue in Schwerin” state the minutes of the 1978 meeting, an outcome of the city ordinance back in 1965 that created a hierarchy of war dead deserving of protection where fallen Wehrmacht soldiers were not included. The consequences were now apparent as these graves on communal burial grounds were as good as gone due to abandonment and gradual erasure through the leveling of grave mounds.⁵⁰⁵

The 1976 meeting of the *Vertrauenspfarrer* was also noteworthy because representatives of the Volksbund managed to attend at the Auguststraße location in East Berlin. Representatives Ludolph, Müller, and Neumann, as well as Dr. Nora Noth from the now diminished Berlin Bureau of West Berlin attended. The four reported on the recent work of the Volksbund in both Eastern and Western Europe. They added that the Volksbund “is considering entering in negotiations with East Germany just as they have with other East European states and believes the Red Cross would be their new partner.” The *Vertrauenspfarrer* expressed skepticism to this approach and related that they do not have a positive relationship with the Red Cross in East Germany, partially out of a labor shortage and partially out of ideological reasons on the side of the state and communal offices. They agreed that the East German government’s approval of the Geneva convention on the protection of war graves demonstrated that they have renewed interest in the topic but expected continued and varied difficulties working with local and communal administrations. This new situation combined with the generational shift occurring as the war generation was

⁵⁰⁴ “Vermerk über die Tagung der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 01.03.1976,” EZA 110/115.

⁵⁰⁵ “Vermerk über das Jahrestreffen der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 06.03.1978,” EZA 110/115.

aging and the younger generations displayed little interest in protecting German war graves.⁵⁰⁶

Such problems only increased with frequency into the late 1970s. Dr. Achterberg reported in 1978 on the increased frequency of grave desecration around Greifswald. The others believed this to be isolated rather than indicative of a larger trend, but still noted it as a troubling sign.⁵⁰⁷ Pastor Luckau, who had sixty cemeteries in the *Oderbruch* under his supervision with the help of the *Friedhofbrigade*, reported that the local authorities are removing wooden crosses from communal cemeteries, no longer allowing Christian symbols.⁵⁰⁸ That same year, the *Vertrauenspfarrer*, described the general state of their work in the following five points:

1. The government has made its negative attitude towards the Volksbund known
2. Traveling even within the GDR to grave sites has become more difficult as travel bureaus have become unnecessarily expensive and recommend using personal invitations to relatives
3. The intervention of district councils is making grave care agreements more complicated – even before they could negotiate directly with the administration of a communal cemetery.
4. Exhumations to the BRD have hardly occurred in recent years
5. They can no longer expect information through the Red Cross of the GDR.⁵⁰⁹

With the work of the *Vertrauenspfarrer* becoming more difficult, the Lutheran Church's Department of War Graves focused on restructuring its relationship to the Volksbund and its commemorative goals. High Consistory Behm insisted that the "pastoral aspect" of its work must be preserved. It did not know how long it could keep this work going given the generational change but cited the many small local cemeteries of the 19th century that had persisted due to private or communal initiative. He hoped that this indicated

⁵⁰⁶ "Vermerk über die Jahreskonferenz der Abt. Gräberfürsorge am 08.04.1975," EZA 110/115.

⁵⁰⁷ "Vermerk über das Jahrestreffen der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 06.03.1978," EZA 110/115.

⁵⁰⁸ "Vermerk über die Tagung der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 01.03.1976," EZA 110/115.

⁵⁰⁹ "Vermerk über die Tagung der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 01.03.1976," EZA 110/115.

that the work it did could persist long after it could no longer continue. Behm also concluded that neither the Volksbund, the Red Cross, nor the State could be expected to take up this work in the East anytime soon. The West Berlin based office on Hildegardstraße remained necessary for communication purposes, but the War Graves Department on Auguststraße would be where the daily work for the care of war graves would take place for the foreseeable future.⁵¹⁰ High Consistory Behm, as well as the *Vertrauenspfarrer*, also noted on how their work was becoming more relevant within the context of the growing peace movement in East Germany, and less for the sake of commemorating fallen German war dead of the Second World War. They noticed that people held “devotions” on *Totensonntag* and Easter with the theme of atonement noticeable, where the more left wing *Aktion Sühnezeichen* (Action Atonement or ASZ) exerted considerable influence.⁵¹¹ ASZ had been active in West Germany since the 1950s and in East Germany since the mid-1960s. Its goal was to promote German reconciliation with Jews and Poles through religious acts of contrition and cultural exchange. The ASZ often found itself at odds with the commemorative goals of the Volksbund. At the 1978 meeting, the pastors discussed dissident efforts against the SED’s militarization of East German youth and the difficult questions it raised such as whether the *Vertrauenspfarrer* and the church should weigh in with an emphasis on pacifism, disarmament, and atonement for the past, “so that the church does not become guilty again.”⁵¹² They concluded that “educating for peace is the greater task of their day.”⁵¹³

Meanwhile, the yearly complaints of the *Vertrauenspfarrer* started to push the Volksbund to reconsider its recent political alignment with the SPD. In the previous chapter, the Volksbund leadership supported Willy Brandt’s *Neue Ostpolitik* toward the other Eastern

⁵¹⁰ “Vermerk über die Jahreskonferenz der Abt. Gräberfürsorge am 03.05.1974,” EZA 110/115.

⁵¹¹ “Vermerk über das Jahrestreffen der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 06.03.1978,” EZA 110/115.

⁵¹² “Vermerk über das Jahrestreffen der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 06.03.1978,” EZA 110/115.

⁵¹³ “Vermerk über das Jahrestreffen der Vertrauenspfarrer der Gräberfürsorge am 06.03.1978,” EZA 110/115.

Bloc states as a way to gain access to the war graves. Yet Brandt's, and later Schmidt's, administration failed to produce any breakthrough with East Germany. Therefore, a realignment of the Volksbund towards the CDU became favorable. In its monthly publication *Kriegsgräberfürsorge* from March 1980, the Volksbund accused the Federal Government in Bonn of "not working to the desired extent for the preservation and care of the German soldiers' graves in the communist-ruled states. Moreover, it also claimed that in the GDR some existing soldier graves are being systematically erased through leveling. Furthermore, even if reburials are being carried out for remains whose identities are known by name, the new location is often not shared."⁵¹⁴ Conservative politicians began making this a campaign issue. During a session of the Bundestag in Bonn on Wednesday May 14, 1980, CSU representative Dr. Fritz Wittmann submitted the following inquiry. "Does the Federal Government have information that German soldiers' graves are being systematically leveled in the GDR, and what does it intend to do about it?" The Chancellery answered:

The Federal Government does not have any information about the systematic leveling of German soldiers' graves in the GDR, as your question suggests. The declaration has confirmed that the GDR government is adhering to the provisions laid down in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, guaranteeing the dead's right to rest and ensuring that the burial sites can be found. If you or your informants are aware of verifiable cases in which action has been taken in the field in contradiction to the official declaration of the GDR government, the Chancellor would be grateful. The federal government always tries, in close cooperation with the Volksbund, to clarify individual cases and, above all, to act in the interest of the relatives of those who died in the GDR, if the circumstances allow it.⁵¹⁵

Conservatives in the Bundestag and much of the Volksbund found this explanation insufficient and frustrating given the yearly reports coming from the *Vertrauenspfarrer*. Accusations that the Schmidt administration was not taking the war graves issues seriously enough grew.

⁵¹⁴ Letter from the Minister for Inner German Relations Henkel to the Office of the Chancellery secretary Germelmann, 19.05.1980, BArch B 136/16494.

⁵¹⁵ Minutes of the Session of Bundestag Bonn Wednesday, 14.05.1980, BArch B 136/16494.

The Minister of State to the Federal Chancellor Gunter Huonker wrote the Volksbund President Josef Schneeberger defending the efforts the Chancellor: "The Chancellor has made it clear on many occasions that caring for the graves of German soldiers is particularly important to him. Your suggestions that this topic should be considered at a possible meeting between the Federal Chancellor and the Secretary General of the GDR have been received with interest."⁵¹⁶ Huonker then suggested that Schneeberger take up the special issue of the war graves in East Germany with the Federal Ministry for Inner-German Relations instead. This suggestion did not dissuade the feeling in the Volksbund that the Chancellery was distancing itself from its role in the war graves question. Official efforts to settle the protection of war graves in East Germany seemed to have become a secondary concern in Bonn.

The Volksbund closely watched the inter-German summit between Chancellor Schmidt and Erich Honecker December 11-13, 1981, to see if chancellor Schmidt would follow up on his original promise. This summit was only the second meeting of East and West German heads of government after Willy Brandt's famous or - for the Stasi - infamous visit to Erfurt in 1970. The embarrassment of that visit ran deep within the East German security service due to its inability to properly stage the event. East Germans cheered "Willy, Willy" throughout his visit and showed more support for the West German Chancellor than their own SED leaders. Under no circumstances were East German officials going to make the same mistake and worked to stage the event as much as possible.

The second summit also took place during a tense phase of inter-German relations. Primarily, this was at the height of the controversy surrounding the NATO double track decision. Despite this resurgence in Cold War tension, both Schmidt and Honecker tried to

⁵¹⁶ Letter from Minister of State to the Chancellor Gunter Huonker to Volksbund President Schneeberger, May, 1980, BArch B 136/16494.

maintain inter-German relations on a more practical basis – approaching less controversial topics such as travel and tourism into East Germany from the West, currency exchanges, and keeping lines of communications between the two heads of government open, while avoiding larger questions of sovereignty and citizenship. Yet, their respective superpower alliances made this difficult. Schmidt had more leeway with Washington, but for Honecker, there was little room for deviation from Moscow’s foreign policy interests. On October 9, 1980, the GDR Ministry of Finance surprised the federal government with an order that increased the minimum exchange rate just for West German citizens visiting East Germany from 13 to 25 DM per day. This move increased the flow of valuable West German currency into cash-strapped East Germany. The unpopular move decreased the numbers of tourists heading into East Germany. Erich Honecker also issued his so-called "Gera Demands," which included, among other things, the recognition of East German citizenship by Bonn. Such recognition would have been tantamount to full recognition of the East German state beyond the terms of the Basic Treaty of 1972. Full recognition of either German state would have made German division permanent. These terms were deemed unacceptable by the West German government. In the run-up to his visit to East Germany, Schmidt had let Honecker know that the "Gera demands" were a non-starter at the planned meeting. Nevertheless, the Volksbund’s expectations of the summit to address the graves question, and those of many West Germans to improve inter-German relations, were high.

Historians usually depict the December 1981 meeting between the two German heads of government as being of little of importance.⁵¹⁷ Although the discussions dealt with immediate and controversial issues such missile armament, domestic German trade, minimum currency exchange rates, honoring East and West German citizenship despite

⁵¹⁷ Wentker, Hermann. "Chapter 4: NATO’s Double-Track Decision and East-West German Relations," in *The Nuclear Crisis: The Arms Race, Cold War Anxiety, and the German Peace Movement of the 1980s*, (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2022), 87-103.

competing claims of legitimacy, the Elbe border, and the status of the permanent representations, both sides' positions were too intractable. Little was achieved other than both sides assuring the other to continue to strive for good neighborly relations in the interests of peace and security in Europe and for the benefit of the people in both German states. Despite Chancellor Schmidt's promise, and his aid Gunther Huonker's assurance to the Volksbund to address the war graves question, the promise went unfulfilled. Unlike his meetings with Brezhnev, Schmidt did not see an opportunity to do so.

In the aftermath of this meeting, the East German government regulated war graves on its territory for the second and final time in its history. The drafted resolution reached the East German Politburo on April 20, 1982. Unlike the first time in 1957 when the highest official General Secretary Walter Ulbricht took part, Erich Honecker was not present. He only signed off on the resolution when it reached his desk. Also different from 1957, where both West and East Germany claimed to be the sole successor German state, the SED treated the German war dead on its own territory as its own responsibility, which it chose to avoid in practice to the best of its ability. Since the Basic Treaty of 1972 and its normalization of relations with West Germany – just short of recognizing each other - German war graves could now be claimed by West German families with support of the federal government in Bonn. Under the Geneva convention, East Germany was now supposed to honor these requests. The Politburo's decision to take up the issue of war graves again in April 1982, after ignoring the issue for twenty-five years, was likely an attempt to review its official policy in preparation for future talks with Bonn. The constant inquiries from the StäV demonstrated that the West Germans were not going to drop the issue any time soon. Even if it did not come up during the inter-German summit, the SED may have anticipated it. The Politburo therefore decided on April 20 that the "exhumations and transfers of dead Germans to the FRG (West Germany) are to be carried out at the request of the next of kin or state organs of

the FRG, provided that this is not contrary to the interests of the GDR.⁵¹⁸ The major caveat of this move was “as far as the fallen are former members of the SS, the fascist police and other criminal fascist organizations, their graves are not considered war graves within the meaning of the Geneva Agreement of August 12, 1949.”⁵¹⁹ It is unclear if local officials used this exception as a legal basis by which they could erase graves of Wehrmacht soldiers. They considered them “fascist war dead” broadly, and potentially would not have to rely on the arbitrary application of local *Ruhefriste* to achieve the erasure of these graves. What is clear is that this resolution did nothing to change the war graves policy in East Germany as it existed.

The Politburo further decided,

There is no interest and no need to extend the visitation possibilities for citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany, to extend them to groups to prevent demonstrative appearances nor to work together with the Volksbund in the FRG. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the maintenance of war graves is used to a large extent for militaristic and revanchist purposes, with the substantial participation of the Volksbund. The humanitarian aspects associated with the treatment of war graves can be dealt with more effectively in contacts with the relevant relatives from the Federal Republic of Germany. Visiting and caring for war graves does not require mediation by the Volksbund.⁵²⁰

The Volksbund’s relationship with the East German state was another area where there is virtually no change. The significance of this resolution was what it revealed about East Germany’s position in the Warsaw Pact. The Politburo recognized the reality that West Germany had been cultivating diplomatic relations with many of its fellow Warsaw Pact allies and had asserted itself as responsible for all German war dead around the world over the last twenty years.⁵²¹ The East Germans were also aware of the Volksbunds recent visits to the Soviet Union and other socialist states.⁵²² The Politburo realized that this was a

⁵¹⁸ BArch DY 3023/1014, slide 0173.

⁵¹⁹ BArch DY 3023/1014, slide 0177.

⁵²⁰ BArch DY 3023/1014, slide 0177.

⁵²¹ BArch DY 3023/1014, slides 0174-6.

⁵²² BArch DY 3023/1014, slides 0174-6.

diplomatic area where their own allies had sidestepped East German sovereignty.

Nonetheless, The Politburo doubled down on its position, stating “that there are no reasons on the part of the GDR to hold talks with the Volksbund on war graves. The socialist states are to be informed of the GDR’s position... and to coordinate policy towards the FRG.”⁵²³

The resolution recognized that East Germany came too late to game and the SED was only asking now that its socialist allies coordinate policy. Although the care of war graves may have been not the most pressing issue of the Cold War, it is interesting that this was an issue where the principles of international, socialist solidarity seemed to not apply. For Yugoslavia and Romania, it was clearly an attempt to bring in more Western capital to boost their stagnant economies – something the GDR was not above doing as well.

The Politburo concluded its resolution by repeating the same reasons from 1957 for rejecting cooperation with the Volksbund and commenting on the war grave agreements of other socialist countries.

The GDR assumes that the war graves service will be abused by the relevant institutions in the FRG for militaristic and revanchist purposes. The GDR would welcome if other socialist countries followed this position. However, if socialist states intend to start or continue bilateral cooperation with the FRG in the field of war graves care, the GDR asks to reject all attempts by the FRG to use the care for war dead to act for all Germans.⁵²⁴

Once again, East Germany took a rather weak position, and allowed West Germany to take the lead on the war graves issue by refusing to get involved in any meaningful way. East Germany thereby lost the opportunity to integrate the commemoration of German war dead into East German state-socialism.

It was not without precedent for the SED to adjust state commemorative practices to integrate graves and memorials that it previously labeled as fascist, reactionary, or deviant socialism. Under Erich Honecker, SED-approved historians accepted certain enlightened

⁵²³ BArch DY 3023/1014, slides 0176-9.

⁵²⁴ BArch DY 3023/1014, slides 0176-9.

Prussian leaders such as Frederick the Great as legitimate predecessors to the centralized Socialist state. East Germany focused on the growth of the worker's movement, the "progressive" thinking of Prussian absolutists and bureaucrats, and the historical relationship between Prussia and Tsarist Russia.⁵²⁵ One of the East German bloc parties, the NDPD, a liberal party created to attract former military and state officials of bourgeois backgrounds into the SED political structure, had been doing this since its post-war inception. The NDPD published memorial essays for Vincenz Müller after his death in 1961 and Otto Rühle the same year. Vincenz Müller, the first leader of the NDPD, had been a high ranking general of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front, who was captured by the Red Army in 1944, joined the National Committee for a Free Germany, later became a supporter of the SED.⁵²⁶ Otto Rühle had been a KPD leader and Spartacist member during the 1918-19 revolution but left the party. He rejected the centralizing authoritarianism of Marxist-Leninism in favor of anarchism and later supported Leon Trotsky. The KPD and the early SED disavowed him for both reasons, but by the 1970s celebrated him as a contributing personality to East German socialism.⁵²⁷ During several anniversary years of the July 20 assassination attempt against Hitler. The NDPD even tried to claim Claus von Stauffenberg as "a hero of the German worker" for his failed officer's coup, despite his clear aristocratic and monarchist background.⁵²⁸

At the same time, the historical personalities the SED chose to rehabilitate, or permitted the bloc parties to do so, were safe choices. The SED was still beholden to Moscow to commemorate the Red Army and its own KPD resisters, not "dead Fascist invaders."

⁵²⁵ See: Sabrow, Martin. *Verwaltete Vergangenheit: Geschichtskultur Und Herrschaftslegitimation in Der DDR*. Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsanstalt, 1997; McLellan, Josie. *Antifascism and Memory in East Germany: Remembering the International Brigades, 1945– 1989*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; Olsen, Jon Berndt. *Tailoring Truth: Politicizing the Past and Negotiating Memory in East Germany, 1945-1990. Studies in Contemporary European History: Volume 15*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2015.

⁵²⁶ "Trauerrede für Vincenz Müller," BArch DY 16/3358.

⁵²⁷ "Trauerrede für Otto Rühle," BArch DY 16/4716.

⁵²⁸ "NDPD Erinnerungsarbeit," BArch DY 16/5186.

Rehabilitating the memory of fallen Wehrmacht soldiers – even thirty to forty years later – was still likely a step too far. As a rump state of a former fascist society, East Germany had a special relationship with the USSR in terms of interference in government policy compared to the other Warsaw Pact states. Leaving the commemoration of German war graves to West Germany may have been the only conceivable option, even if that decision risked being sidestepped by its own allies in the international discussion surrounding the protection and preservation of German war dead. As for the German war dead on its own territory, despite lip service to the Geneva Convention and respecting requests from West Germany, the SED's policy towards German war dead functionally stayed the same until the Fall of the Berlin Wall.

The Volksbund's Struggle for Relevance

The shake up in the Volksbund leadership in 1970 and its commitment to an “all victims together” commemorative approach did not silence its critics. Many West Germans, especially youth born after the war, continued to insist that *Volkstrauertag* promoted a glorification of combat death, and ignored German complicity in Nazi crimes. In his speech to *Volkstrauertag* in 1971, Volksbund president Willi Thiele tried to welcome the criticism against the Volksbund and spin it as a net positive.

Critical voices were heard again this year. We at the Volksbund already feel them when preparing the commemorations. But it shows, and I see that as positive, that a process of rethinking is underway in our people. It is quite obviously a reorientation in the consideration and evaluation not only of the war and its victims, but of our entire recent national past as such. Increasingly, this fact, especially among the younger generation, is no longer taken for granted or even natural. I think that's a good thing. The Volksbund approves of this reorientation and tries to promote it. The commemoration of the war dead, and war graves care in general, has not always led to such consequences. For centuries the saying was: "Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori," those - I would like to say – are fatal words.”⁵²⁹

⁵²⁹ “Ansprache des Präsidenten des Volksbundes, Professor Dr. Willi Thiele, zur Friedenswoche in Bremen und Bremerhaven am 15.11.1971,” BArch B 122/8158, pg 16.

Despite the changes that the Volksbund leadership were adamantly insisting were taking place, many did not trust that these were in good faith. Some activist groups tried to compete with the Volksbund, offering alternative commemorative approaches to *Volkstrauertag*. One activist group from Mölln in Schleswig-Holstein called the *Jungsozialisten* (young socialists) invited Federal President Gustav Heinemann to its city to “an event that was directed against the horrors of war in [Vietnam]” instead of the traditional ceremony in Bonn.⁵³⁰ The invitation explained that “until now, *Volkstrauertag* in Mölln has always been organized by the local schools. This year, however, the students declined to take part in an event that was to be held in a traditional manner.”⁵³¹ Since 1968, student and youth-led protest had come to dominate German domestic politics – especially in how to discuss and remember the Second World War. Gustav Heinemann was an old-school working-class Social Democrat with a protestant background. He had been a pastor and briefly a member of the CDU. He did not feel comfortable with the trappings and opulence of state rituals and formal gatherings. He preferred informal settings and often received visiting heads of state in casual clothes and at his private residence. For this reason, President Heinemann refused to take up the ceremonial *Schirmherrschaft* of the Volksbund, and seldom appeared at *Volkstrauertag* in Bonn, much to the chagrin of the Volksbund. The offer of the *Jungsozialisten*, as unlikely as it seemed, may have interested the president, but Heinemann declined the offer.

In another attempt to offer an alternative to *Volkstrauertag*, the director of the city Springe also wrote President Heinemann in August 1971 to suggest changing the content of *Volkstrauertag* to turn away from state ritual and align it more with the anti-war movement.

As chairman of the Volksbund, local group in Springe, I tried to explain to the people of Springe how important it is to find new content for the commemoration hour, which is customary and often seen as a compulsory exercise, and to develop new forms of events accordingly. *Volkstrauertag*

⁵³⁰ “Letter from the Jungsozialisten of Mölln to President Heinemann, 08.10.1971, BArch B 122/8158, pg 40.

⁵³¹ “Letter from the Jungsozialisten of Mölln to President Heinemann, 08.10.1971, BArch B 122/8158, pg 40-1.

should therefore not be a day with official commemorations and external symbols. Every year, in an event, for example a discussion forum, we should make ourselves soberly aware of whether we have made any progress towards peace.⁵³²

Younger generations began to view the Volksbund critically as a quasi-governmental organization and no longer a popular, grassroots NGO. An official from the office of the Federal President, Döring, responded on August 24: “The Volksbund is of the opinion that its review of the victims of the two world wars and the National Socialist tyranny should not be missing from the celebrations of the day of national mourning.” However, Döring also emphasized that *Volkstrauertag* should emphasize the push for peace in the current world more than it has before. He assured the director, “you can be sure that the Federal President will continue to pay special attention to the problem.”⁵³³ The impact of the protests against the war in Vietnam, which had reached widespread popular support since 1968, now placed popular pressure on the Volksbund broadly.

The Volksbund, while not opposed to incorporating a more pacifist commemoration, cautioned against putting too much emphasis on the present. The Managing Director of the Volksbund, Klaus von Lutzau, argued that Germans had a unique historical and moral duty that other peoples did not.

When it comes to commemorating such a day of remembrance, the German people have a much harder time than their former opponents of the war, who are united in their firm conviction that they fought for a good and just cause. For us Germans, however, commemorating the dead of World War II is a problem. Not only the outcome of the war, but above all its origin and the terrible events of the National Socialist tyranny up to the mass gassings in the concentration camps cast heavy shadows on the commemoration of the dead of the last war. The consciousness of our people is changing. The critical voices are increasing. The further we move away from the war, the more urgent and lively the discussion about the necessity, meaning and design of the *Volkstrauertag* becomes in our time... In this respect, mourning - contrary to

⁵³² Letter from Springe City Director Langrehr to President Heinemann, 04.08.1971, BArch B 122/8158, pg 44.

⁵³³ Letter from the Office of the President, signed Döring, to Springe City Director Langrehr, 24.08.1971, BArch B 122/8158, pgs 42-3.

the opinion of many of the younger generation - can very well be productive for peace.⁵³⁴

The Volksbund recognized how the perceived importance of graves had declined in an overall revision of historical memory of the war. The Volksbund had a point in this regard. Changing the content of *Volkstrauertag* to align with political pacifism while turning away from the memory of the Second World War could lead to a similar outcome as in the previous post war decades – the German public avoiding an honest confrontation with the crimes of the Nazis. However, the issue was more complicated than this. Despite the changes made to the Volksbund leadership, the overwhelming majority of the organization and its structure remained conservative and committed to the commemoration of German soldiers. The Volksbund itself was moving in two different directions, and some of its critics argued that at the end of the day, the Volksbund would stick to its traditional roots.

***Die Kehrseite der Medaille* – The Campaign against the Volksbund**

Most criticisms levied against the Volksbund focused on how it had shaped and influenced *Volkstrauertag* and tended to emerge as the holiday approached at the end of the year. In the Summer of 1972, an organization known as the *Internationale der Kriegsdienstgegner* (The International of Conscientious Objectors or IDK) based in West Berlin took it much further. It published an expose titled *Die Kehrseite der Medaille* (The Flipside of the Coin) – the cover depicts the two sides of one of the Volksbund's medals given for years of service, the anterior being the Five Cross emblem of the Volksbund with *Mortui Viventes Obligant* (The Dead Obligate the Living), and the posterior with the face of Siegfried Emmo Eulen, one of the founders and first President of the Volksbund. He was an active supporter of the Nazis. Comprising of archival materials, letters, and articles published in Volksbund materials or by high-ranking members of the Volksbund since its founding in

⁵³⁴ Letter from Bundesgeschäftsstelle des Volksbundes Klaus von Lutzau to the Interior Ministry, 20.08.1970, BArch B 122/8158, pgs 77-8.

1919, the intent of the IDK was to “confront not only with its fascist past but also with his present militaristic function. The mask of hypocrisy under which the Volksbund claims to ‘perform the German people’s duty of honor’ must fall for the honor of the war dead and that their memory is not abused.”⁵³⁵

Since 1968, Germany’s struggle to “come to terms with its past” (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) had become a central issue in the youth protest movement. Many young Germans perceived the older generations and persons of authorities as being compromised by the Nazi past, unwilling to honestly confront it, and enabling a possible return of Nazism. A small group comprising of youth, professionals in law and education, and some older activists, the IDK made a compelling case for the Volksbund’s tendency to claim that it promoted peace publicly while quietly assisting the military, whether it was the Wehrmacht in the past or the Bundeswehr in the present, in recruiting soldiers and glorifying combat death. Additionally, the IDK presented documents demonstrating the Volksbund’s affinity for the Nazi party. One example was an article from the January 1934 issue of *Kriegsgräberfürsorge* where Siegfried Eulen wrote “under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, the past year has brought us the fulfillment of our longing. The years of turmoil and decline are over. Work and performance can unfold again in a blissful way. The way to *Volksgemeinschaft* (racial community) is open!”⁵³⁶ Also included were dozens of articles in the infamous Nazi publication *Völkischer Beobachter* in which the Volksbund is lauded for “restoring German *Heldenverehrung*” (hero worship) and “reminding the German people that dying for one’s Fatherland is the highest perfection of manhood.”⁵³⁷ In January 1942, Eulen wrote again in *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*: “...our leader and supreme commander decided to take on the archenemy...who, in alliance with the international powers led by England-Judah,

⁵³⁵ Wilfried Wettstedt, *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, pg 7, BArch B 122/14359, pg. 91.

⁵³⁶ Wilfried Willstedt, *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, pg 46, BArch B 122/14359, pg 110.

⁵³⁷ Wilfried Willstedt, *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, pg 46, BArch B 122/14359, pg 111.

threatened to devilishly poison Europe and beyond the whole world.”⁵³⁸ The IDK focused considerable attention on the writings of Siegfried Eulen, emphasizing his Antisemitism, his affinity for Hitler, and his Nazi ideology, since he was the founder, first President, and primary administrator of the Volksbund from 1919 to 1945. The IDK highlighted how problematic it was that the Volksbund still honored his image through their highest award bestowed for years of service.⁵³⁹ After Siegfried Eulen’s death in 1945, his wife, Christel Eulen, remained a member of the Volksbund executive board until 1970 – another point the IDK emphasized throughout its 120-page publication.

Die Kehrseite der Medaille also had many of its pages dedicated to accusations of the Volksbund’s post-war virtue signaling towards political pacifism while maintaining close ties to the Bundeswehr. One particular controversial issue for the student movement was mandatory military service for males aged 18 to 45, which activists sought to end. In the Volksbund’s other publication *Stimme und Weg* issue 33 from November 1971, the Volksbund wrote an article titled “Do we promote peace, if we abolish soldiering?” and argued points such as “A powerless and defenseless people becomes easy prey for aggressive forces. That means terror and violence - not peace!” and, in a veiled criticism of Brandt’s *Neue Ostpolitik*, “does it serve peace if we secure ourselves on all sides with treaties? Certainly, in this way we reduce the risk of violent clashes. But the bloody history of the broken treaties teaches us that there must be more behind them than just the calculations of politicians and diplomats.”⁵⁴⁰ An editorial piece in that same claimed that “unilateral disarmament (including conscientious objection!) would not prevent war.”⁵⁴¹ The IDK pointed out that despite the clear cooperation between the new Volksbund leadership and the Brandt administration on the Volksbund’s projects in Eastern Europe, the Volksbund base

⁵³⁸ Willfried Willstedt, *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, pgs 13-14, BArch B 122/14359, pgs 94-5.

⁵³⁹ Willfried Willstedt, *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, pg 14, BArch B 122/14359, pg 95.

⁵⁴⁰ Willfried Willstedt, *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, pg 97, BArch B 122/14359, pg 136.

⁵⁴¹ Willfried Willstedt, *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, pg 97, BArch B 122/14359, pg 136.

remained firmly conservative and in opposition to any concessions or easing of tensions with the communist East.

Since Willi Thiele's election, he and the Volksbund leadership attempted to rebrand the Volksbund as more overtly pacifist to win support from a politically active youth who had been protesting ongoing conflicts around the world – especially West German financial support of US involvement in Vietnam. The IDK sought to prove that Volksbund's rhetorical and political shift did not match its actions. Included were several documents establishing a quid pro quo relationship between the Volksbund and the Bundeswehr. The military provided money through collections and often logistical or moral support for the Volksbund's many projects, and the Volksbund, who had a strong presence in church youth groups and schools across the Federal Republic, promoted mandatory military service among the youth in return. One letter from a school director of a *Gymnasium* in West Berlin demonstrated the Volksbund's influence over West German youth. The Volksbund constantly recruited students to participate in fundraising drives against the rules of the school and protests of teachers.⁵⁴² The director reasoned however that since he perceived the Volksbund as “advocating for peace through the care of graves,” he considered cracking down on their influence in his school as unnecessary.⁵⁴³ The IDK also attempted to present the Volksbund as funneling West German youth into the *Bundeswehr* – a more difficult argument to make considering the Volksbund publicly framed these collection drives as being for the care of graves – an activity it argued was critical for peace.

In its conclusion, the IDK argued that the Volksbund, despite détente attempted to bring its “chauvinistic interests” back into play in the Eastern Bloc countries, especially in Poland and the Soviet Union. It claimed that under the pretext of “reconciliation over the

⁵⁴² Willfried Willstedt, *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, pg 106, BArch B 122/14359, pg 141.

⁵⁴³ Willfried Willstedt, *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, pg 106, BArch B 122/14359, pg 141.

graves,” grave monuments were to be erected for members of the National Socialist army of aggression that invaded these countries, “thereby denying the responsibility of the individual in war and in the preparations for war.” In a reference to the stereotypical defense of Nazi criminals at the Nuremberg trials, the IDK proclaimed “They were only doing their duty! – this is how the Volksbund justifies military service and mass murder and speaks of humanity.”⁵⁴⁴ The conclusion continues with the IDK seemingly placing the Volksbund within the *Sonderweg* thesis, the “special path” theory of German history states that bourgeois Germans subverted democratic reform by allying itself with conservative authorities of the imperial era (church, Kaiser, and military) in exchange for economic dominance of the working classes, which paved the way for Hitler’s eventual rise to power and Germany’s special path to modernity. “The *Volksbündler*,” as the IDK derisively refer to Volksbund members, “not only maintain the best connections to the respective ruling power groups in the state, but also the respective ruling power groups, ie. the National Socialists, who see their interests and goals represented by the Volksbund in an extremely effective way. By sanctifying everything that authority-oriented thinking had ever produced through honoring the war dead, the Volksbund proved itself to be a reliable servant of government.”⁵⁴⁵ Then the IDK became even more polemical by calling for the defunding and dissolution of Volksbund – it also started referring to the Volksbund and its members as “Grave diggers.”

The Volksbund, with its chauvinist tradition, is not only the gravedigger for soldiers, but also the gravedigger of all antimilitarist endeavors. Today, with generous financial support from the public sector, the Volksbund works hand-in-hand with soldiers and veteran associations as well as with the Bundeswehr on behalf of its approximately 740,000 members. The IDK e.V. Berlin does not expect that the Volksbund will recognize itself as a sponsor of the war and will therefore dissolve. However, we expect that the Volksbund will no longer receive any further support. We call on the Volksbund not to be allowed to

⁵⁴⁴ Willfried Willstedt, *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, pg 112, BArch B 122/14359, pg 144.

⁵⁴⁵ Willfried Willstedt, *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, pg 112, BArch B 122/14359, pg 144.

continue to operate undisturbed in schools, communities, churches, and other institutions. These gravediggers must have no future.⁵⁴⁶

The IDK attacked the very core values of the Volksbund and attempted to delegitimize the Volksbund as a suitable partner in the pursuit of peace and democracy in West Germany. The circulation of this publication was likely small, but the IDK ensured that the Volksbund's principal partner, the federal government in Bonn, received a copy. It sent one to the office of President Gustav Heinemann in October 1972.⁵⁴⁷ The Volksbund, for its part, were not going to take a constructive approach to dealing with this attack on its work. The Managing Director of the Volksbund, Klaus von Lutzau, wrote the Office of the President, attempting to defend the organization against the IDK's accusations: "It is not easy to comment on this without becoming bitter and falling into the same polemical tone that characterizes this document. Its authors - probably still young people - made it all too easy for themselves and apparently failed to take note of the public statements and the literature of the Volksbund, about the last 20 years, at all." This dismissal on generational grounds was quite a presumption on the part of the Volksbund to discredit the IDK as an organization of hotheaded youth. In addition to the amount of research that went into *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, the IDK's advisory board that approved the publication consisted of a doctor, two pastors, several jurists, two law professors, journalists, and other professionals who were certainly not all under the age of thirty.⁵⁴⁸

Lutzau then took an even more problematic strategy to defend the Volksbund. He wrote,

the accusation of "producing the glory of hero worship" is just absurd. Should it really be so difficult to recognize that the Volksbund has also gone through a development, a learning and changing process in the justification of its work and thus in its self-image, precisely because it is constantly dealing with the consequences and experiences of the wars!/? Anyone who has consciously

⁵⁴⁶ Willfried Willstedt, *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*, pg 112, BArch B 122/14359, pg 144.

⁵⁴⁷ Letter from IDK e.V. Berlin to the Office of the President, 16.10.1972, BArch B 122/14359.

⁵⁴⁸ "Beirat Mitglieder der Internationale der Kriegsdienstgegner e.V. Berlin," BArch B 122/14359, pg 84.

experienced the history of Europe and especially Germany over the last 50 years must be aware that it is unhistorical and inadmissible to characterize a group of people, an association or even the society of the Federal Republic as a whole by what was expressed in Germany in the period between the two world wars or during the so-called 'Third Reich' and the Second World War. It is simply unfair to evaluate people who were active 50, 40 or 30 years ago according to political knowledge and experiences that are accessible and self-evident to us today; all the more so since most of them are dead and unable to defend themselves.⁵⁴⁹

This argument was rather weak. First, except for Siegfried Eulen who was killed in 1945, the majority of Nazi-era Volksbund members were still alive and active in the early 1970s, Klaus von Lutzau included. Second, this argument absolved all living Germans and German society from any responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich. Third, it contradicted President Thiele's claims that the Volksbund had changed and were willing to honestly engage with the past.

Klaus von Lutzau unintentionally helped the IDK make its argument to President Heinemann. This unwitting admission lent veracity to the IDK's depiction of the Volksbund during the Nazi era. President Heinemann asked the Interior Ministry to evaluate the authenticity of the IDK's documentation and give its own assessment of the IDK. The Interior ministry found the documents to be "authentic," but only gave a brief description of the IDK as conscientious objectors dedicated to pacifism.⁵⁵⁰ Two recent assessments of the Volksbund under National Socialism by historian Jacob Böttcher and journalist Bernd Ulrich align with the IDK's depiction and even cite *Die Kehrseite der Medaille* as a primary source collection on the Volksbund. The IDK's depiction of Volksbund during the Nazi era through primary sources is without a doubt accurate.

Its claim of Volksbund hypocrisy post-1945 is a different matter. Klaus von Lutzau's wrote in the same letter to President Heinemann,

⁵⁴⁹ Letter from Volksbund General Secretary Klaus von Lutzau to Office of the President government director Dr. Wemmer, 13.12.1971, BArch B 122/14359.

⁵⁵⁰ BArch B 122/14359, pg 191.

We do not consider it a contribution to peace, which is what the IDK is after all, if one defames a large association with ideological black-and-white painting and an unhistorical mixture of facts and statements from past decades with what the Volksbund is doing today and so that the people who suffered the most from the war, namely the bereaved, who place their trust in this Volksbund and whose care is one of our main tasks. We consider it harmful to peace when new prejudices are created or existing ones cemented, thereby further poisoning the atmosphere in our society, and deepening its antagonisms. Building up an opponent like a “cardboard comrade” and then hitting him is apparently more convenient and attractive for some than careful information and tolerant efforts to understand in conversation. We regret that the authors of the documentation failed to identify themselves about the Volksbund of today, that they failed to speak to us, which would be easy in Berlin in particular, where the Volksbund is represented by a group in its regional association there active, open-minded, and discussion-ready young people is supported.⁵⁵¹

This claim was true, considering that at least the Berlin branch of the Volksbund were more willing to undertake projects that confronted Nazi crimes – albeit without the support of the rest of the organization. As covered in chapter 3, the West Berlin branch had constructed a proper cemetery for Nazi victims in La Boisse, France, many of whom were Jews murdered by the SS. Lutzau was likely also against that project from the mid-1960s, like most in the Volksbund were, but by 1971 he was more than willing to take credit for it on behalf of the Volksbund. As for the IDK’s accusation of Volksbund hypocrisy for depicting itself as dedicated to peace while fostering close relationships with both the military and federal government, this is also technically true. However, this hypocrisy remains ubiquitous in the modern world as it had in past eras. Most people, organizations, or states, including authoritarian regimes, identify as anti-war and make verbal overtures for peace, and yet violence, wars, standing militaries exist. The standard of pacifism by which the IDK determined hypocrisy or sincerity was one that few people, organizations, or states, past or present, could ever achieve. The Volksbund was no more hypocritical than most modern

⁵⁵¹ Letter from Volksbund General Secretary Klaus von Lutzau to Office of the President government director Dr. Wemmer, 13.12.1971, BArch B 122/14359.

states that hold days of remembrance and call for peace, while simultaneously waging conflict and increasing military spending.

The cabinet, and President Heinemann in particular, likely agreed with most of the IDK's sentiment. Yet, he and the government in Bonn continued to support the Volksbund's projects across Europe, especially efforts to access graves in the East, choosing to place more value in the services provided by the Volksbund for West Germans (identification of remains, grave care, providing space to mourn) than the implications of its rhetoric, past or present. The Volksbund emerged from the scandal with its leading partner still behind it. However, the letter exchanges between the Volksbund and government officials started to shift after 1972. Volksbund leaders sent letters addressed to individual officials, such as the Chancellor, the President, or the Interior Minister, but increasingly received replies from lower ranking officials. By the start of Helmut Schmidt's administration in 1974, this institutional distancing towards the Volksbund became the rule for all high officials. Unlike his predecessor Willy Brandt, chancellor Schmidt did not personally write or sign a single letter to the Volksbund during his administration. The Volksbund official who noted this change in attitude the most was President Willi Thiele, who had enjoyed a close communicative relationship with chancellor Brandt between 1970 and 1974. Until he stepped down as president in 1977, Thiele vented his frustration by claiming Bonn no longer prioritized the Volksbund or its work.⁵⁵² Government officials had no problem refuting such claims, citing

⁵⁵² "Vermerk über das Gespräch des BKs mit Prof. Dr. Thiele am 14.06.1976, Palais Schaumburg," signed Referat 213 VLR I. Oldenkott (398), BArch B 136/15472, pgs 2-3; Willi Thiele and Chancellor Helmut Schmidt had a heated exchange over the accusations of disinterest on the part of Schmidt's government during a scheduled meeting at the Chancellor's office in Schaumburg palace on June 16, 1976. Thiele accused Schmidt of intentionally avoiding several ceremonies to which he had been invited, including the opening of the military cemetery Dionyssos-Rependoza in Greece in 1975, and pushing the war graves question to the bottom of the agenda during his recent meeting with Polish Premier Edward Gierek. At this last point, Schmidt reminded Thiele of his time on the Eastern Front; that he had lost many friends whom he always thinks about; that he cares for the war graves issue; at that he knew sensed Gierek was not ready to open war graves in Poland without greater movement from the Soviets on the issue. Thiele, according to the transcript, left the meeting unconvinced of the Chancellor's conviction to represent the Volksbund abroad.

the Foreign Office's close cooperation with the Volksbund in its projects across Europe, in particular in Eastern Europe, and never admitted a change in policy.⁵⁵³ One could speculate that this change in attitude towards the Volksbund from Bonn could have possibly been a consequence of the IDK's publication *Die Kehrseite der Medaille*. The evidence compiled by the IDK may have reminded the SPD government in Bonn of the Volksbund's tainted past, which had likely fallen into obscurity by the 1970s. In the post-1968 era of intense scrutiny of West Germany's institutions, leaders, and their roles during the Nazi era, high profile politicians such as the Chancellor and the Federal President in direct communication with the Volksbund could have been deemed as a potential political risk.

The Volksbund's Conservative (Re)turn

Other problems emerged on the home front for the Volksbund in the early 1970s. The Volksbund leadership learned in 1972 that the major public funded television broadcaster ZDF (*Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen* or Second German Television) refused to televise the new central *Volkstrauertag* ceremony in West Berlin live. It decided instead to only show brief clips of the proceedings in Berlin later in the day. Not having one of Germany's states funded broadcasters televise an event meant Germans could not see it. The Volksbund learned that the ZDF planned to air episodes of the popular daytime western series *Shiloh Ranch* instead. President Thiele commented particularly on the irony that this television show depicts "brutality and violence in a dominating role."⁵⁵⁴ The Volksbund spoke with the Intendant of ZDF, Professor Dr. Holzamer, arguing that this move disrespected the wishes or

⁵⁵³ "Vermerk über das Gespräch des BKs mit Prof. Dr. Thiele am 14.06.1976, Palais Schaumburg," signed Referat 213 VLR I. Oldenkott (398), BArch B 136/15472, pgs 3-4.

⁵⁵⁴ Letter from Volksbund President Willi Thiele to Chairman of the Council of the EKD Bishop Hermann Dietzfelbinger on November 3rd, 1972, EZA 2/17669.

sensitivities of millions of Germans and the millions who have died because of war and violent regime.⁵⁵⁵

Dr. Holzamer replied that the reason for their decision was purely technical and was not intended as a slight against *Volkstrauertag*. Because the Volksbund created a new central ceremony in West Berlin, it was not possible for the ZDF to have enough equipment, personnel, and time to broadcast the whole thing. All of its equipment was already in use in West Germany proper and could not be transported in time. Holzamer also refuted the accusation that they showed *Shiloh Ranch* instead because that was a show broadcasted out of Wiesbaden. The ZDF was not going to budge on its coverage of the event.⁵⁵⁶

The Volksbund reached out to EKD Bishop Hermann Dietzfelbinger for support to try and change ZDF's mind before *Volkstrauertag*. The bishop replied "our abilities to intervene in this issue have been hindered due to the absence of the Intendant of ZDF, him being in Moscow and London recently. It is likely that the central ceremony will only be mentioned in a five-minute report between 19:00 and 19:45. As an alternative, the ZDF could broadcast the full ceremony the following week, but we encourage you to negotiate this directly."⁵⁵⁷ The Volksbund suggested that ZDF could change its plans to accommodate a live broadcast of the ceremony, but the plan went ahead unchanged.

The fight with ZDF over showing the ceremony live and, in its entirety, played out yearly thereafter, frustrating the Volksbund. ZDF continued to insist that the issue was infrastructure and logistics, but the Volksbund viewed the real issue to be a lack of interest among the major networks and as a refusal to be accommodating. In a letter to a Lutheran Bishop in November 1975, President Thiele shared a letter he received from the President of

⁵⁵⁵ Letter from Volksbund President Willi Thiele to Chairman of the Council of the EKD Bishop Hermann Dietzfelbinger on November 3rd, 1972, EZA 2/17669.

⁵⁵⁶ "Rundesreiben des ZDFs Intendant an die Mitglieder des Fernsehates und des Verwaltungsrates des ZDFs den 10.11.1972, betr. Übertragung der zentralen Gedenkfeier zu Volkstrauertag," EZA 2/17669.

⁵⁵⁷ Letter from High Chancery Erwin Wilkins to Volksbund President Thiele 13.11.1972, "betr. Übertragungen am diesjährigen Volkstrauertag durch das ZDF," EZA 2/17669.

the Bundestag Annemarie Renger. Renger related a complaint she received from a woman in Berlin, who had lost her husband in the Russia campaign and was disappointed not to watch the *Volkstrauertag* ceremony live. She only caught the brief clips later that day. President Thiele then explained to the Bishop that the Volksbund had been receiving numerous such letters for the past three years, and remained unsuccessful in negotiating with the two largest public broadcasters in the West Germany, ARD and ZDF.⁵⁵⁸ The following year, High Consistory Ernst Willkens saw Thiele's letter and shared that in his own experience working with television councils he has received very little "*Gegenliebe*" (requited love) and little interest in broadcasting *Volkstrauertag*. Willkens then promised more support on this issue from the Protestant church going forward.⁵⁵⁹

High Consistory Wilkins did not perceive the issues with broadcasting *Volkstrauertag* as just a technical and scheduling dispute, but as a sign of a larger societal issue. Willkens wrote to President Thiele and two leading bishops of West Germany's protestant church, Bishops Kunst and Class explaining his thoughts. "*Volkstrauertag* acts as a reflection of our society. Germans of the era are so focused on wealth, progress, and growth that they have little interest in immaterial reflection. As soon as these attributes weaken or go away altogether, the old mistakes of the past will return."⁵⁶⁰ Willkens also found the recent Christmas and New Year's speeches of the Federal Chancellor and President disturbing due to their overly secular material messages. "There is a certain hypocrisy around the holiday as what should be a day of reflecting on inner contemplation and self-reflection is condensed to

⁵⁵⁸ Letter from Volksbund President Willi Thiele to Bishop Kunst, 11.12.1975, EZA 2/17669.

⁵⁵⁹ Letter from High Chancery Ernst Wilkens 08.01.1976, "betr. Volkstrauertag, Bezug ihr gerichtetes Schreiben an Bischof Kunst den 11.12.1975," EZA 2/17669.

⁵⁶⁰ Letter from High Chancery Erwin Wilkens to Volksbund President Thiele, Bisop Claß, and Bishop Kunst, 08.01.1976 „betr. Volkstrauertag Bezug Schreiben vom 27.12.1975," EZA 2/17669.

an hour, which is usually just broadcasted to the plenary hall of the Bundestag, hardly the most reverent place in Germany.”⁵⁶¹

The Volksbund leadership felt it had lost its close relationship with the federal government in Bonn and now decided to strengthen its relationship with the established churches even more. Since the first post-war years, the Volksbund fostered a much closer relationship with Germany’s established churches than they had during the Weimar and Nazi eras. The Volksbund leaders used more overt religious rhetoric, aesthetic, and content since the late 1940s. As a result, the biggest struggle of organized Christian churches in the Western world, secularization, also became the struggle of the Volksbund. Wilkens pointed out in his letters to President Thiele that the main aspects of *Volkstrauertag*, “Reconciliation over the graves, work for peaceful coexistence among nations, and the promotion of peace, are not being adhered to by most of the population.” Wilkens worried that if the Volksbund and the church did not reach more levels of society than just those with direct experiences with the Second World War, the day will slowly fall into oblivion. Wilkens then suggested that the Volksbund should consider merging *Volkstrauertag* with *Buß und Betttag* and admitted regret that the Protestant church tried to push a merger with “*Prussian Totensonntag*” over two decades ago. Wilkens concluded his lengthy letter that the church and the Volksbund “must discuss the future of *Volkstrauertag* seriously.”⁵⁶²

The Volksbund and the Protestant church distributed High Consistory Wilkens’ letter widely, which renewed a discussion that had faded away over twenty years ago – whether *Volkstrauertag* would be more successful as a secular, state-led ceremony, or a religious one. Younger West Germans usually complained about the abundance of days dedicated to remembrance of the dead in November (*All Saints Day, Buß und Betttag, Totensonntag*, and

⁵⁶¹ Letter from High Chancery Erwin Wilkens to Volksbund President Thiele, Bisop Claß, and Bishop Kunst, 08.01.1976 „betr. Volkstrauertag Bezug Schreiben vom 27.12.1975,” EZA 2/17669.

⁵⁶² Letter from High Chancery Erwin Wilkens to Volksbund President Thiele, Bishop Claß, and Bishop Kunst, 08.01.1976 “betr. Volkstrauertag Bezug Schreiben vom 27.12.1975,” EZA 2/17669.

Volkstrauertag) but with so many alive that experienced the war themselves, there was still enough support for the holidays. A perceived growing lack of interest for not only in *Volkstrauertag*, but also in the church itself, gave renewed interest to this issue both within the Volksbund and the Protestant churches.⁵⁶³

Following an extensive correspondence between President Thiele and High Consistory Wilkens, the two resolved by the end of 1976 to form a small committee to discuss the proposal of merging the holidays. The committee consisted of representatives of the Protestant and Catholic Churches, the media, the major political parties, and, unlike in 1952, members of the Jewish community in West Germany, demonstrating the increased influence of Holocaust remembrance. The planned meeting was to take place by the end of June 1977. Yet, already in February 1977, High Consistory Wilkens expressed that he had the feeling of “helplessness with the issue of *Volkstrauertag*.” Despite, the support and excitement from President Thiele, the rest of the Volksbund had been less than enthusiastic. Wilkens insisted that the Volksbund knew that public interest in the care of war graves had waned, and yet the presence of war graves could be the tangible opening for maintaining *Volkstrauertag*. Even if the Protestant churches convince the majority of the Volksbund to support and discuss a possible merger, Wilkens also recognized that “if it comes to a new policy, negotiations with the Ministry of the Interior, Foreign Office, and the possibly the Office of President, will be necessary, as well as naturally the Church council, the Church conference, and all the regional churches.”⁵⁶⁴ A long path indeed just to consolidate some holidays. But for the Volksbund and many Protestant leaders, it was also about adapting to a more diverse and changing society for the future, and therefore worth the effort – a minority elite effort to mold cultural adaptation.

⁵⁶³ Letter from Bishop Kunst to Volksbund President Thiele, 11.03.1976, EZA 2/17669; Letter from Volksbund President Thiele to High Chancery Erwin Wilkens, 02.02.1976, EZA 2/17669.

⁵⁶⁴ Letter from High Chancery Wilkens to Prelate Heinz Georg Binder, “betr. Volkstrauertag, Bezug Schreiben vom 22.02.1977,“ EZA 2/17669.

By the 1980s, the Volksbund and the Protestant church remained divided on how best to renew interest in the West German public for the commemoration of German war dead. But other divisions came into consideration as the EKD tried to bring the BEK and other religious groups into the discussion. After one joint meeting in January 1981, one church official wrote “The Volksbund is not in favor of merging VT with any other holiday. The BEK will not take part in any proceedings related to VT while it is still called that with its perceived connections to the NS-era *Heldengedanktag*.”⁵⁶⁵ *Aktion Sühnezeichen* (ASZ), still a small group but with considerable accomplishment in reaching across the Cold War divide, had some success in orienting *Volkstrauertag* explicitly around the memory of those persecuted by the Nazis in many of the regional churches. Since the early 1960s, the East and West German branches of this interfaith organization emphasized spiritual atonement for German collaboration in Nazi crimes broadly – rather than seeking to exculpate Germans from responsibility. They published and distributed *Predigthilfen* or preaching aids for *Volkstrauertag* to Protestant communities in both East and West Germany. The materials intended to connect the horrors and suffering of the Second World War with contextualizing the dangers and need for peace today. The EKD and the BEK, as well as the Protestant Church in Poland, agreed to hold a joint “*Friedenssonntag*” this year, but it suffered from the fact that it was November 9, 1980, the anniversary of *Reichspogromnacht*. It also suffered from the proximity to *Volkstrauertag*, which Protestant parishioners of the East Germany could not engage with due to its connection with *Heldengedanktage* and the Third Reich. Deile suggested that *Friedenssonntag* should be shared with one of these other holidays, namely *Volkstrauertag* since they are most similar in content and stated that the name “Volkstrauer” is secular and can more easily be replaced.⁵⁶⁶ Unlike the Volksbund, the ASZ

⁵⁶⁵ Handwritten notes from 26.01.1981 to discussions around *Volkstrauertag* and *Friedenssonntag* (kein Anlass und Schreiber gegeben, aber könnte OKR Horst Echternach sein), EZA 2/17669.

⁵⁶⁶ Letter from ASZ member Volkmar Deile to High Consistory Dr. Horst Echternach, 15.12.1980, EZA 2/17669.

was largely successful in operating in Poland and the GDR since the late 1960s. Its focus was exclusively on reconciliation through the memory of the persecuted rather than fallen soldiers, which gave them an advantage over the Volksbund. It also was quite successful in drumming up youth support in the East, which West German Protestants hoped it could duplicate in West Germany.

The Volksbund leadership was less keen on such cooperation. After Wille Thiele stepped down as its president in 1977, Volksbund leaders began to use a more conservative tone that better reflected its membership, focused more on soldierly commemoration, and more openly aligned with the CDU and CSU. Chancellor Schmidt's SPD government and Federal President Gustav Heinemann, and after 1974 President Walter Scheel, kept the Volksbund at arm's length. The conservative CDU, however, was more than willing to welcome the Volksbund back into the fold. It was under Willi Thiele's successor as president, Josef Schneeberger, also a member of the SPD but a devout Catholic, that this conservative return within the Volksbund leadership was set in motion. Schneeberger, along with others in the Volksbund leadership, felt alienated by the SPD led government. Hans Soltau, Schneeberger's new managing director of the Volksbund during the late seventies and eighties, constantly complained about a perceived lack of interest among West Germany's highest officials to attend Volksbund ceremonies on *Volkstrauertag* and during the rest of the year. This return to the right occurred in tandem with conservative electoral victories throughout the country and the collapse of Helmut Schmidt's administration, culminating in Helmut Kohl's chancellorship in 1982. Even though cooperation with Chancellor Schmidt's government remained productive, as seen in their negotiations in Eastern Europe, the relationship was not as warm as it had been between Brandt and Thiele.

The Volksbund had even less reason to align with left-wing affiliated groups outside of the SPD. The West Berlin branch of the Volksbund was usually willing to work with ASZ,

but it remained the exception. During a meeting in February 1981 with the High Consistory in Hanover, Hans Soltau admitted that the Volksbund “has a difficult relationship with the activist group *Aktion Sühnezeichen*” which he described as having “effusive⁵⁶⁷ and politically leftist ideas...it is no longer feasible to have a productive exchange with them.” Soltau asked that the Protestant church and its various offices not to fulfill too many wishes of this organization. He then expressed concern that some pastors were preparing an event at the Lutheran Academy in Loccum, which he claimed exhibited “historical ignorance and emotional aversion,” but did not provide examples. He asked that the Lutheran Chancery in Hannover and the Protestant church leadership exhibited more “*Versachlichung*” or objectivity in its commemorations, by which he meant more affirmation of the German nation and less criticism. By the end of the meeting both reaffirmed the commitment of their respective organizations to work with one another on this issue. However, the High Consistory, Dr. Horst Echternach, added in his report of the meeting that “the suspicions that the Volksbund is becoming conservative and even reactionary continue.”⁵⁶⁸

Echternach also gave the Volksbund an update that same month on the progress of cooperation with West Germany’s official churches. The leadership of the Catholic Church expressed little interest in it directly, but because of the lack of resonance with its own *Weltfriedenstag* on November 1, it was interested in agreeing upon a common day to commemorate the pursuit of peace. The Protestant churches of East and West Germany agreed to celebrate *Friedenssonntag* the third to last Sunday of the Church year, but this produced many other difficulties. They were resolved to keep *Volkstrauertag* as it was, at least what it symbolizes, for fear of overshadowing the importance of reflecting on the brutality, terror, and persecution during the Second World War given current political

⁵⁶⁷ “*schwärmerisch*” in the original German – a word with negative connotations of fanaticism

⁵⁶⁸ “Vermerk über einen Besuch des Bundesgeschäftsführers des VDKs am 17.02.1982 in der Kirchenkanzlei Hannover, den 18.02.1982,” EZA 2/17670

considerations. Other church holidays at the end of the Church year (before Advent) were also to be considered.⁵⁶⁹ Echternach also shared that the Protestant Churches were “occupied with considerations with the church in the GDR over the problematic nature of *Volkstrauertag*. The East German Protestant Churches emphasized much more in recent years *Friedensgedanke*. Given this history, ‘*Volkstrauer*’ will be in the context of ‘*Gedanken des Friedens*.’⁵⁷⁰

This division in inter-German church commemoration led to the proposition called the *Schrägstrich-Lösung*, or “The Slash Solution” as it was unimaginatively referred to in Protestant church files. The proposal came out of joint meeting of East and West German Protestant officials in March 1981. The name referring to the way the holiday was to be written – *Volkstrauertag/Friedenstag* – as a compromise recognizing that the political situations of the two churches rendered a joint holiday impossible, but they could at least celebrate at the same time.⁵⁷¹ Echternach explained to the Volksbund, this could only happen if *Volkstrauertag* shifts away from memorializing German war dead in general – soldiers, civilians, and the persecuted – and align with the main principles of the political peace movement: anti-War, anti-Nuclear proliferation, and renewed détente between the East and West. While the solution was implemented immediately without further broad agreement, especially from the Volksbund, the Lutheran Chancery in Hannover recommended steps to its member churches to help facilitate the shift towards the so-called *Schrägstrich-Lösung*:

1. The Chancery recommends that its member churches and Protestant institutions dealing with peace issues hold their special events relating to peace in the period from the third to last Sunday of the church (*Volkstrauertag*) year until the Day of Repentance and Prayer (*Buß und Bettag*).

⁵⁶⁹ “Vorlage für die 21. Sitzung des Rates der EKD am 13/14 Feb 1981 in Hannover, betr. Volkstrauertag/Friedenssonntag-Friedenswoche/Friedensdekade, Referent OKR Dr. Echternach,” EZA 2/17669.

⁵⁷⁰ Letter from High Chancery Echternach to Volksbund Chief Official Hans Soltau, “betr. Volkstrauertag 03.02.1981,” EZA 2/17669.

⁵⁷¹ “Bericht an die Leitungen der Gliedkirchen der EKD, Hannover den 27.03.1981, betr. Volkstrauertag/Friedenssonntag – Veranstaltungen zu Friedensfragen, Bezug Sitzung des Rates am 20.03.1981,” EZA 2/17670.

2. A Peace Sunday (*Friedenssontag*) should be observed either on the third to last Sunday of the church year or on the penultimate Sunday of the church year.
3. Improve the liturgical organization of Peace Sunday.
4. Suggest that common prayers for peace are also taken up by churches that are outside the purview of the Protestant churches.⁵⁷²

The following year, in September 1982, the Executive Board of the Volksbund discussed the ongoing relationship with the West German Protestant Churches. In particular, it discussed the issues and questions surrounding *Volkstrauertag*. The Deputy President of the Volksbund, and future President, Hans Otto Weber, wrote to the Protestant leadership to report the results of the discussion. Referencing the conversations between High Consistory Ernst Wilkens and Willi Thiele six years prior and Echternach and Soltau more recently. Weber reported that the Volksbund was now ready to connect *Volkstrauertag* more closely with the peace movement and was looking forward to future discussions on the future framing of *Volkstrauertag*.⁵⁷³ The timing of this decision coincided with the election of Helmut Kohl as the new West German Chancellor, and the return of the conservative CDU/CSU governing coalition (along with the neo-liberal FDP). Between his election, the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, and Margaret Thatcher in 1979, there was a political shift across the West towards political conservatism more generally. Chancellor Kohl pursued a commemorative policy that aligned with the conservative elements of the Volksbund. Kohl's victory, coupled with the Volksbund's falling out with the SPD, ended the leadership's attempts to appeal to more progressive voices outside the Volksbund. Membership numbers dropped from 700,000 in 1970 to less than 500,000 in 1980, despite Willi Thiele's efforts to transform the Volksbund from the top down.⁵⁷⁴ Unlike in the 1950s, when the idea of

⁵⁷² "Bericht an die Leitungen der Gliedkirchen der EKD, Hannover den 27.03.1981, betr. Volkstrauertag/Friedenssontag – Veranstaltungen zu Friedensfragen, Bezug Sitzung des Rates am 20.03.1981," EZA 2/17670.

⁵⁷³ Letter from Volksbund deputy President Hans Otto Weber to the presiding council of the EKD Bishop D. Eduard Lohse, 20.09.1982, EZA 2/17670.

⁵⁷⁴ Bernd Ulrich, Christian Fuhrmeister, Manfred Hettling, and Wolfgang Kruse. *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Entwicklungslinien und Probleme* (Berlin: bra wissenschaft verlag, 2019), 493.

merging *Volkstrauertag* with a church holiday threatened to change its intended meaning and commemorative focus – especially after the Volksbund was forced to give up *Sonntag Reminiscere* – the holiday now offered new opportunities to energize its conservative base. The notion of merging *Volkstrauertag* with a church holiday now became much more palatable for members of the Volksbund. On one hand, it could boost its membership numbers through a closer religious partnership. As veterans and the wartime generation aged, church membership was also in decline. They were also more likely to take an interest in the care of war graves than secular institutions. On the other hand, the merger offered a path back to the commemoration of German soldiers without criticisms of Germany's past, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

Conclusion – Restoration or Conservative Revolution? The Volksbund After Thiele

By the 1970s the Volksbund felt confident in its position in Western Europe. Its largest and most drawn-out projects – in France and Greece respectively – reached their completion, capped with prominent bi-national commemorative ceremonies. The political and social unrest of the era made it clear that no commemorative approach could appeal to all Europeans but ruling conservatives and their political bases sufficed for the Volksbund's vision of pan-European commemoration – at least in the West.

The same could not be said for the Volksbund's position in divided Germany. In East Germany, despite the continuation of the Volksbund' clandestine project, the stabilization of inter-German relations through the Basic treaty of 1972 made German division seem all but permanent to those in the East. Interest for the commemoration of German war graves declined noticeably within the Protestant Church of East Germany, among the East German population more generally as a new generation came of age who were more adjusted to living under state socialism. SED functionaries also now felt more emboldened to erase German war graves in districts, towns, and cities. The failure of the SPD governments of Brandt and

Schmidt to protect the war graves in East Germany mobilized conservative opposition within the Volksbund and on the floor of the West German parliament. Despite the promises of Willi Thiele in 1970 to move the Volksbund's commemorations and expand membership in a more inclusive and critical direction, the Volksbund continued to be a lightning rod of criticism for its unwillingness to address its role under National Socialism and continued quasi-state role. Even the West German state leaders began to publicly distance themselves while continuing to support its work. Thiele's new direction not only failed to expand the Volksbund's base beyond conservative veterans and religious groups, but also failed to convince these groups that commemorative consensus was possible. The Volksbund's perception of continued political and social alienation from broad swaths of the West German population, and from the younger postwar generation in particular, triggered a conservative retrenchment of its leadership by the 1980s. The Volksbund embraced West Germany's established churches more than it had ever before, preparing its privileged position with the conservative CDU Kohl government after 1982.

Chapter 7: Conservative Resurgence 1983-1990

In the final years of the Cold War era up until the first few years of reunified Germany, the CDU returned to power in West Germany under Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Kohl played a critical role in West German memory politics of the 1980s, Cold War era diplomacy with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, and the pursuit of German reunification. The Volksbund's realignment with the conservative values of its base – veterans and religious conservatives – occurred against the context of several larger controversies within West German memory politics, such as the *Historikerstreit* and the Kohl-Reagan visit to Bitburg. The Volksbund had several of its own controversies as it began associating with far-right organizations and individuals. While doubling down on its conservative approach to memory allowed it to survive these controversies in the short term, the Volksbund helped create a more divided memorial culture in West, and later reunified, Germany rather than the consensus it had promised.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl also played a crucial and active role in delivering the final war grave settlements with Poland and the Soviet Union. In both cases, the political context of 1989 and Kohl's own diplomatic goals that same year played a more decisive factor in settling the war graves question in Poland and the Soviet Union than the Volksbund's own commemorative program. Reconciliation did not form the precondition for the Volksbund's final access to graves in Poland and the Soviet Union, but sheer historical convergence – in other words luck.

The leaders of the Volksbund's secret project in East Germany faced a similar scenario. As the 1980s wore on, many *Vertrauenspfarrer* believed themselves to be the final generation to preserve German war graves in East Germany. The dramatic events of November 9, 1989, and later German reunification changed the situation dramatically. Many East Germans renewed their interest in commemorating German war graves as State

Socialism collapsed. Reunification saved the Volksbund and its commemorative program from its falling membership – at least for another decade.

The Volksbund during the Kohl years

During a Volksbund led seminar for its church partners titled *Die Sorge für die Gräber der Gefallenen-warum? – Besinnung*” (Caring for the graves of the fallen-why? – Reflection) a Catholic deacon named Franz Stenzaly held a lecture, emphasizing that “the Volksbund is of the Christian-occidental tradition and considers its humanitarian and ethical duty as part of the historical development of the Christian Occident. It should therefore see itself primarily as the partner of the church.” The deacon added that during his volunteer work in the Volksbund 1952-65, there seemed to be no meditative or homily-based considerations brought into Volkstrauertag. “Since the German Evangelical Conference of 1977 there has been increased interest in bringing more Christian elements into Volkstrauertag,” according to the deacon, but “a remaining issue was how to accomplish this for both Catholic and Lutheran churches.”⁵⁷⁵

The political situation in West Germany was considerably different in 1983 than it was in 1977. The first conservative government in fourteen years took office under Chancellor Kohl, who, trained as a historian, had a very keen interest in the commemoration of the recent past and affinity for the Volksbund. Kohl supported the Volksbund’s projects abroad through state-to-state diplomacy, especially during his famous talks with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, and attended many commemorative events related to the Second World War during his time – albeit not without controversy such as his infamous Bitburg visit. Helmut Kohl was also interested in promoting what he saw as a more constructive view of the shared German past – one that was not reduced to the Holocaust and twelve years of

⁵⁷⁵ Bericht “Die Kirche und der VDK (Volkstrauertag) Botschaft und Dienst Eine partnerschaftliche Aufgabe“ den 24.02.1983 Berlin, EZA 2/17670.

Nazi rule.⁵⁷⁶ While not denying its darker moments, Kohl believed in highlighting both negative and positive aspects of German history to normalize it and allow subsequent generations to not feel ashamed of national identity. In other words, it was a reform of national-conservative memory politics for a more critical era. In his first *Volkstrauertag* celebration as Chancellor, Helmut Kohl gave the keynote speech and took ample opportunity to praise the work of the Volksbund. He thanked the Volksbund “for taking the initiative” in commemorating the war dead and motivating “well over 100,000 young people to take part in international youth camps tending war graves abroad over the past 30 years.”⁵⁷⁷ With Helmut Kohl’s ample support for their commemorative approach, the Volksbund had even less reason to mitigate its commemorative approach abroad – a commemoration of multi-nationalisms – nor its “all victims together” approach for *Volkstrauertag*.

This renewed German conservatism made the Volksbund more confident in its ongoing negotiations with the established churches on the future content of *Volkstrauertag*. The new General Secretary of the Volksbund, Adolf Barth, met with representatives of the Catholic and Protestant churches in Cologne in mid-January 1983 to discuss the possibility of bringing more overt Christian themes into *Volkstrauertag* proceedings at the central celebration in Bonn, and in locales across Germany. Another discussion took place in Mainz on January 27, 1983, between Barth and the same church officials where they agreed that although the holiday was secular in origin, “it should be an occasion for the church to

⁵⁷⁶ This goal was also the primary reason why Chancellor opposed the building of the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington DC. He believed it would forever anchor the image of ‘Germans as Perpetrators’ in the American consciousness. See: Jacob S Eder, “Confronting the Anti-German Museum: (West) Germany and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1979-1993,” in *Holocaust Angst: The Federal Republic of Germany and American Holocaust Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 84-129.

⁵⁷⁷ Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V., “Wir gedenken ... Reden zum Volkstrauertag 1951 - 1995; eine Auswahl von Reden, die anlässlich der zentralen Gedenkstunde des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge gehalten wurden,“ (Kassel, 1995), 126.

remember the victims of war and violent regime.”⁵⁷⁸ One Catholic representative explained that sermons should not only think of general victims, but also of those who survived and continue to grieve. He then provided an anecdote of once holding a service at Mauthausen on Good Friday where a survivor interrupted the service to say, “Thank you for not abandoning us” and showed his release papers from this place in 1945.⁵⁷⁹ The Catholic representative then added “what the Volksbund does is part of the Christian works of mercy: burying and comforting the mourners... it may not be vital for everyone, but it provides the necessities for many.”⁵⁸⁰

Starting in 1983, the Catholic and Protestant churches with the Volksbund created a common liturgical service for *Volkstrauertag* by the end of March.⁵⁸¹ They agreed that *Volkstrauertag* “should not be unilaterally converted into a politically motivated day of peace within the sphere of influence of the peace movement,” and that since “historical memory and current responsibility are the two focal points, church recommendations should include aspects of both the Volksbund and the peace movement.”⁵⁸² For the first time since the early 1950s, the Volksbund and the established churches had reached an agreement on the religious influence of *Volkstrauertag*. A Lutheran Bishop commented in April 1983 “that the Volksbund and the Protestant churches have good relations in areas of our common interest,

⁵⁷⁸ Bericht “Die Kirche und der VDK (Volkstrauertag) Botschaft und Dienst Einer partnerschaftlichen Aufgabe“ den 24.02.1983 Berlin, EZA 2/17670.

⁵⁷⁹ Bericht “Die Kirche und der VDK (Volkstrauertag) Botschaft und Dienst Einer partnerschaftlichen Aufgabe“ den 24.02.1983 Berlin, EZA 2/17670.

⁵⁸⁰ Bericht “Die Kirche und der VDK (Volkstrauertag) Botschaft und Dienst Einer partnerschaftlichen Aufgabe“ den 24.02.1983 Berlin, EZA 2/17670.

⁵⁸¹ Bericht “Die Kirche und der VDK (Volkstrauertag) Botschaft und Dienst Einer partnerschaftlichen Aufgabe“ den 24.02.1983 Berlin, EZA 2/17670.

⁵⁸² “Vermerk über das Gespräch zwischen VDK und EKD Hannover den 15.03.1983,“ den 17.03.1983, EZA 2/17670; The fallout of the NATO double track decision, and increasingly bellicose rhetoric from the two superpowers motivated both pacifist camps of West Germany’s religious communities and left-leaning environmentalists against nuclear proliferation to form the core groups of the peace movement in the 1980s. See: Saskia Richter, “The Protagonists of the Peace Movement” In *The Nuclear Crisis: The Arms Race, Cold War Anxiety, and the German Peace Movement of the 1980s*, edited by Christoph Becker-Schaum, Philipp Gassert, Martin Klimke, Wilfried Mausbach, and Marianne Zepp, 1st ed., 19, (Berghahn Books, 2020), 189–206.

for instance *Volkstrauertag*. The fact that we were able to come to an agreement only strengthens them.”⁵⁸³

Yet, brewing controversies around commemoration and historical memory soon disrupted the Volksbund’s unity with their church partners. As the publicity of the *Historikerstreit* and the Kohl-Reagan visit to an SS burial ground Bitburg in 1985 and 1986 respectively primed the public sphere for controversies around memory, an incident in early November 1986 brought the Volksbund into the debates surrounding the history and commemoration of SS and Wehrmacht soldiers. The West German press had received word that the Volksbund had accepted a mutual aid organization for members of the former Waffen-SS, the *Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit der Angehörigen der ehemaligen Waffen-SS* or HIAG as a corporative member, paying monthly dues. The Volksbund had long associated with leaders and members of this organization, but never had an official association. Yet, disturbing revelations soon emerged about how local Volksbund branches had co-developed commemorative events with this controversial veteran’s organization.

The HIAG formed in Bonn in 1951 out of a collection of SS veteran groups dedicated to the legal, economic, and historical rehabilitation of the SS. HIAG never had more than 20,000 official members, which peaked in the mid-1950s, but represented and helped to connect 250,000 former Waffen SS into a lobbying bloc. HIAG described SS veterans as "stigmatized," "defamed," "victims of arbitrariness," "second-class citizens," or "soldiers like any other," who were in "purely military deployments during the war."⁵⁸⁴ It interpreted the measures taken by the Allies to deliberately create economic hardship and justify a lasting "defamation of all German soldiers," naturally conflating the SS with the Wehrmacht. During the 1950s, hardship and defamation were mainly attributed to the implementing law under

⁵⁸³ "Brief an den Vorsitzenden der EKD-Bischof Eduard Lohse von Eduard Haßkamp den 01.04.1983," EZA 2/17670.

⁵⁸⁴ Karsten Wilke, *Die Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit (HIAG) 1950-1990. Veteranen der Waffen-SS in der Bundesrepublik*, (Paderborn: 2011), 15.

Article 131 of the West German Basic Law, which stipulated specific pension regulations for former members of the Waffen SS. West Germany, claimed the HIAG, incorporated the verdict at Nuremberg into its legal system through this article and resulted in “material restrictions and a lasting loss of honor” for former members of the Waffen-SS.⁵⁸⁵ This motif of a “loss of honor” resulted from the Waffen-SS being declared a criminal organization. For this reason, HIAG described the verdict against the Waffen-SS as an “Exceptional Law,” “Nuremberg Revenge Judgment,” “Allied Law,” and “The Nuremberg Law.” HIAG members not only complained about the allegedly denunciatory character of the court decision and its effects, but at the same time tried to portray their alleged persecution similarly to Jewish victims of the Nazi regime without explicitly admitting to Jewish suffering through carefully chosen semantics.⁵⁸⁶

The 1980s in particular were years when the legacy of the Waffen-SS and the Wehrmacht were publicly debated, most famously in the *Historikerstreit*. Conservative historian Ernst Nolte believed the time had come to view Nazi crimes in a more objective manner, “as one views Napoleon’s disastrous invasion of Russia,” and equate genocidal actions of the Waffen-SS and Wehrmacht with Stalinist era crimes, from which Hitler claimed to be defending Europe. Many high-profile intellectuals, such as philosopher Jürgen Habermas, accused Nolte and his supporters of revisionism and Nazi apologetics. The Volksbund leadership, much like Ernst Nolte, also felt it was time to “normalize” its relationship with SS veterans. But not all in the Volksbund or those who supported the organization believed this was a wise decision. When the story of the HIAG’s partnership with the Volksbund broke on November 7, 1986, the *Hannoversche Allgemeine* depicted the Volksbund as divided against itself over the inclusion of HIAG. But the fact that the board

⁵⁸⁵ Wilke, *Die Hilfsgemeinschaft*, 126.

⁵⁸⁶ Wilke, *Die Hilfsgemeinschaft*, 127.

members were in support of HIAG membership damaged the Volksbund's public perception.

The newspaper wrote:

The inclusion of HIAG in the Volksbund was met with criticism from within the organization. As reported, the majority of the eleven state executives now disapprove of the decision made by the Kassel federal headquarters. However, while the Bremen state board speaks of a blatant "wrong decision", there is still no clear echo from Lower Saxony. This is apparently related to the fact that the Volksbund federal chairman comes from Lower Saxony: Eduard Hasskamp, the former Oldenburg district president elected by the CDU.⁵⁸⁷

The decision not only resulted in media scrutiny of the Volksbund on the eve of *Volkstrauertag*, but the withdrawal of several groups from its corporative membership with the Volksbund. The chairman of the state association of Jewish communities in Lower Saxony, Michael Fürst, expressed his outrage in a letter to the Lower Saxony Volksbund, writing "it is inexplicable to me that no thought was given to the inclusion of this association."⁵⁸⁸ Heinz Galinski, Chairman of the Jewish Community in Berlin and Holocaust survivor, shared this sentiment by stating "it is impossible for me to attend the Volksbund rally on *Volkstrauertag* as I have done up to now," and promised the end of his community's relationship with the Volksbund.⁵⁸⁹ Several West-Berlin based associations asked the Berlin Senate to stop all financial support immediately. Youth organizations and churches also protested HIAG's incorporation. In an act of solidarity with the protestors, the head of the Volksbund branch in West-Berlin admitted publicly to have petitioned the Headquarters in Kassel to immediately expel the HIAG from the Volksbund's corporative list.⁵⁹⁰

The controversy casted a shadow over the *Volkstrauertag* celebrations in 1986 as a divided Volksbund continued to stall in its indecision. Likely because of the apparent role of

⁵⁸⁷ "Schlag ins Gesicht der Juden: Die HIAG-Affäre des Volksbundes," Hannoversche Allgemeine 07.11.1986, BArch B 438/225.

⁵⁸⁸ "Schlag ins Gesicht der Juden: Die HIAG-Affäre des Volksbundes," Hannoversche Allgemeine 07.11.1986, BArch B 438/225.

⁵⁸⁹ "Schlag ins Gesicht der Juden: Die HIAG-Affäre des Volksbundes," Hannoversche Allgemeine 07.11.1986, BArch B 438/225.

⁵⁹⁰ "Schlag ins Gesicht der Juden: Die HIAG-Affäre des Volksbundes," Hannoversche Allgemeine 07.11.1986, BArch B 438/225.

Volksbund members from Lower Saxony in keeping the HIAG a corporative member, one *Volkstrauertag* celebration associated with this Volksbund branch came under particular scrutiny. In the small town of Essel, about equidistant between Bremen and Hannover, violence between local Neo-Nazis and protestors erupted as the former marched to the local cemetery to honor graves of the 6th Mounted Waffen-SS division. This division included Deathshead (*Totenkopf*) concentration camp guards, who took part in “cleansing efforts” during the opening months of Operation Barbarossa in the Baltic states and around Leningrad, and fought the final defense of the Rhineland January to March 1945 with conscripted sixteen year old boys filling its front line ranks.⁵⁹¹ The Neo-Nazi march was separate from the *Volkstrauertag* event held by the local Volksbund in the cemetery, but as some reporters later discovered, this was not always the case. Some protestors vented their disgust on the graves directly. The *Hannoversche Allgemeine* reported that “unknown perpetrators vandalized 22 graves at the Essel military cemetery in the district of Soltau-Fallingb.ostel.” According to the police, during a clash between protestors and Neo-Nazis “one of the demonstrators was injured with a plastic guidepost, another suffered bruises from kicks, and an officer was probably hit with an iron bar. He suffered broken ribs; a bone fragment entered his lung and caused a lung rupture.”⁵⁹² Fortunately there were no fatalities.

This incident was however not the first-time violence broke out in Essel on *Volkstrauertag*, and far from the first time Neo-Nazis gathered in the military cemetery. The 1986 incident was only the first time it gained national attention. The *Hamburger Rundschau* reported in October 1985 that the Neo-Nazi ceremony had been going on in Essel since at least 1977, and that in 1984 “smaller anti-fascist groups have been beaten up by right-wing extremists in recent years when they showed up with banners during the celebration. One

⁵⁹¹ Stephen Rusiecki, *In Final Defense of the Reich: The Destruction of the 6th SS Mountain Division Nord* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010), 339-344.

⁵⁹² “22 Gräber verwüstet,” NRZ 17.11.1986 41 Jahrgang, Nr 268, BArch B 438/225.

protestor who had demonstrated the past two years explained: “The Nazis are by no means free of violence, they have German shepherds with them, and they sometimes let them loose on us.”⁵⁹³

The demonstrations in 1985 were perhaps the most dangerous. Members of the Green Party had announced their participation in a counterdemonstration in Essel and attempted to get a court order to block access to the cemetery for Neo-Nazis and their local supporters. The spokesman for the Greens criticized that “there was no opportunity to engage with the authorities...the administrative court could not be reached to lodge an objection.” The Greens accused the local police forces of “suppressing their ability to challenge the fascists” and “making a peaceful demonstration was almost impossible.”⁵⁹⁴ A local Pastor Albrecht Walsemann from the nearby district of Celle spoke out against any form of violence and attempted to intervene by leading the demonstration, hoping to promote non-violence. Walsemann explained to a reporter that in April 1945, as a young man, he had taken part in the defense of the area against British soldiers and that he personally knew many of the young SS conscripts buried in the Essel cemetery. Walsemann attempted an argument that built upon the memory of the SS dead and seized the narrative from the Neo-Nazis. “The spirit of obedience and command, which was particularly strong in the Federal Republic, had to be changed. But that can only happen through arguments and not through acts of violence,” he demanded.⁵⁹⁵ Walsemann then addressed his interviewers, “if you guys had been there then, you would have taken part too. Don't throw everything in one pot. The young soldiers lying here are not to be equated with those who were in the Waffen-SS.”⁵⁹⁶ His attempt to

⁵⁹³ “Seit acht Jahren: Totenehrung als brauner Spuk,” *Hamburger Rundschau*, Nr. 43 17. Okt. 1985, 4. Jahrgang, BArch B 438/225.

⁵⁹⁴ “Demonstration verlief ohne große Störungen,” *Walseroder Zeitung*, Montag 18 November, 1985, BArch B 438/225.

⁵⁹⁵ “Demonstration verlief ohne große Störungen,” *Walseroder Zeitung*, Montag 18 November, 1985, BArch B 438/225.

⁵⁹⁶ “Demonstration verlief ohne große Störungen,” *Walseroder Zeitung*, Montag 18 November, 1985, BArch B 438/225.

turn the younger SS soldiers into victims mirrored the Volksbund's longstanding attempt to do the same with German soldiers broadly.

As the *Volkstrauertag* participants and the demonstrators began their march towards each other for a potential major clash, the police intercepted them before crossing the bridge on Landesstrasse on the way to the cemetery. Bystanders spotted a suspicious device and the bomb squad of the State Criminal Police Office arrived on the scene. In fact, a modified fire extinguisher with a timed explosive was found on a high-voltage pylon on Landesstraße 190 between Essel and the military cemetery. The road had to be completely closed for several hours while the bomb squad disarmed the device. Most of the locals had already left while waiting for the road to clear, although it later revealed that a group of 80 neo-Nazis marched with black flags to lay a wreath in the cemetery sometime in the afternoon. The demonstrators, who numbered around 500, left the scene after the road closure. The police spokesman told the *Walseroder Zeitung* that he was not aware of any injuries, but that they had narrowly averted a major disaster.⁵⁹⁷

More digging from reporters revealed both a longer history of rallies at Essel and more disturbing realities that tied back to the Volksbund. Since the 1950s, both old and new Nazis together with representatives of the community and numerous clubs in the area held a common *Volkstrauertag* ceremony in at the military cemetery in Essel. Up until the 1980s, HIAG officially took part in commemorative events and laying wreaths in the cemetery.⁵⁹⁸ The Volksbund of Lower Saxony was also involved in Essel together with the SS soldiers, who were forced into military inactivity due to Article 131 of the West German constitution,

⁵⁹⁷ "Demonstration verlief ohne große Störungen," *Walseroder Zeitung*, Montag 18 November, 1985, BArch B 438/225.

⁵⁹⁸ Jakob Böttcher, *Zwischen Staatlichem Auftrag Und Gesellschaftlicher Trägerschaft: Eine Geschichte Der Kriegsgräberfürsorge in Deutschland Im 20. Jahrhundert*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 269.

and their relatives from the ranks of the HIAG. A reporter's account after speaking with locals revealed the moment this joint ceremony finally ended.

In the mid-1970s, Pastor Dreier, who had come from Schwarmstedt especially for *Volkstrauertag*, gave a speech that abruptly ended the joint commemoration. In his speech, which had serious consequences for him, Pastor Dreier not only commemorated the soldiers buried in Essel. In view of who had gathered there at the cemetery, he also mentioned the vast victims of the Nazi extermination machine in the death and concentration camps. The victims in the Soviet Union were also mentioned in the speech. That was too much for some of the old and neo-Nazis who had traveled there. Verbal attacks quickly followed by physical assault. The attackers drove Pastor Dreier in front of them with punches. Protected by members of the local rifle club, the clergyman finally had to leave the premises in a hurry and flee.⁵⁹⁹

The exposé then described a long-established culture of intimidation in the district of Soltau, which contained Essel, where anyone who spoke out against the association with HIAG were forced into silence. The reporter provided an example where a student denounced the ceremony as “*Heldenverehrung*,” (Hero worship) but then he and his father, a local master craftsman “were bullied into silence as death threats and threats to shut down his workshop mounted.”⁶⁰⁰ The scandal in Essel did not lead to the banning of the HIAG and ideologically similar organizations from the Essel military cemetery. Instead, the Volksbund in Lower Saxony and the church in Schwarmstedt agreed that the commemoration would no longer be held together in the future. While the morning hours of the annual *Volkstrauertag* were left to the representatives of the community and associations, Pastor Dreier and the Volksbund gave his attackers the afternoon hours to gather on the ground of the military cemetery and thus two separate events were created. The reporter opined, “True to the motto: Out of sight, out of mind.”⁶⁰¹

⁵⁹⁹ “Essel: Neue Wallfahrtsstätte von Neonazis in Essel ?” 24.11.2008, <https://recherche-nord.com/archiv/2008.11.24.html>, accessed 05/10/2023.

⁶⁰⁰ “Essel: Neue Wallfahrtsstätte von Neonazis in Essel ?” 24.11.2008, <https://recherche-nord.com/archiv/2008.11.24.html>, accessed 05/10/2023.

⁶⁰¹ “Essel: Neue Wallfahrtsstätte von Neonazis in Essel ?” 24.11.2008, <https://recherche-nord.com/archiv/2008.11.24.html>, accessed 05/10/2023.

One HIAG member confirmed the decades-long presence of the ceremony in Essel when he wrote to fellow SS-veteran in response to the events in 1986.

As we have been doing for years, we were able to carry out our honoring of the fallen completely undisturbed together with the local community, surrounded by a mixed choir from the local singers' association and a fire brigade band, concluding with the singing of [the Prussian military anthem] *Ich hatt einen Kamerad* and the German National Song! The local population bowed down to our fallen soldiers: How nice that this still exists!⁶⁰²

With public scrutiny of the Volksbund and local *Volkstrauertag* ceremonies in Lower Saxony only increasing rather than fading by December 1986, it was the HIAG that decided to withdraw from the Volksbund. The move ended the controversy but did little to help the Volksbund salvage its reputation. None of the organizations that left during the scandal resumed their association with the Volksbund. Karl Heinz Bitterling (a customs official, SS veteran, and frequent contributor to local newspapers) criticized the move, but not because of the Volksbund's association with former members of the SS. He wrote in a letter to the HIAG "you made it too easy for the Volksbund by withdrawing from the Volksbund. The matter would certainly have been useful if a constitutional complaint had been taken."⁶⁰³ Bitterling apparently saw a wasted opportunity to rehabilitate the SS further, if not in the court of public opinion, then at least in the German high court. A HIAG member wrote Bitterling to express his agreement, explaining,

The scandalous step of the Volksbund in relation to HIAG, to which it allowed itself to be blackmailed, is a mark of disgrace, dishonor, and a betrayal of its historic statutes! It will be interesting to see how long such an important and internationally recognized organization will be able to live with the betrayal of its own internationally recognized principles: "Reconciliation over the grave!" That can't be the last word! I am not satisfied with the reaction of our association so far, but I do not want to criticize it either, because we all know that we are currently dealing with a *new quality* (emphasis in the original) of ongoing slander.⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰² Brief von Hans Garn, Truppenkameradschaft ehemaliger Soldaten der SS Panzer Division Das Reich e.V. an Karl Heinz Bitterling, 12.12.1986, BArch B 438/225.

⁶⁰³ Brief von Karl Heinz Bitterling an die HIAG Bundesgeschäftsführung, Emmerich 12.01.1987, BArch B 438/225.

⁶⁰⁴ Brief von Hans Garn, Truppenkameradschaft ehemaliger Soldaten der SS Panzer Division Das Reich e.V. an Karl Heinz Bitterling, 12.12.1986, BArch B 438/225.

Bitterling explained his scheme further in a letter to Alfred Dregger, fraction leader of the CDU in the West German Bundestag and well known for his apologetics of Nazi crimes. Coincidentally, the Volksbund invited Alfred Dregger to give the keynote speech at the *Volkstrauertag* ceremony in Bonn that same year. Dregger claimed during this speech that “most German soldiers knew little or nothing about [Nazi crimes],” and that “it is unacceptable to contrast the dead German soldiers with the other victims as ‘perpetrators’... They were not the perpetrators, but rather those who, because of their political power triggered crises and wars and determined their course, their results, and their end.”⁶⁰⁵ Dregger attempted to bring these more controversial statements in harmony with the Federal government’s “All Victims Together” paradigm, or the universalization of German war dead as victims with little regard to complicity in the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes. He concluded “do all the dead of war and tyranny deserve the same reverence as the victims of genocide and expulsion as well as the victims of the bombing war, the soldiers who died at the fronts as well as the resistance fighters who had to pay for the uprising against Hitler with their lives? I believe they do.”⁶⁰⁶

In his letter to Alfred Dregger, Bitterling explained that “the legally binding findings of the highest Jewish state court in 1961, when Eichmann was convicted, should objectively apply in Karlsruhe,” referring to the German high court.

The defense had argued that Eichmann belonged to a criminal organization and could not act differently within it, even if he wanted to. The court had to examine the question of whether the Waffen SS fought within the meaning of the Hague Convention on Land Warfare, or if their main task in general to guard the inmates in concentration camps, to select them and to lead the human transports from the east to the camps. Various experts of the Jewish faith who languished in concentration camps for many years or who survived

⁶⁰⁵ Volksbund deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, *Wir gedenken ... Reden zum Volkstrauertag 1951 - 1995 ; eine Auswahl von Reden, die anlässlich der zentralen Gedenkstunde des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge gehalten wurden*, (Kassel, 1995), 145.

⁶⁰⁶ Volksbund deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, *Wir gedenken ... Reden zum Volkstrauertag 1951 - 1995 ; eine Auswahl von Reden, die anlässlich der zentralen Gedenkstunde des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge gehalten wurden*, (Kassel, 1995), 145.

the death marches came to the unequivocal conclusion: only a few members of the Waffen SS stood outside the barbed wire fences as guards.⁶⁰⁷

Bitterling is very selective in his telling of the Eichmann trial, failing to mention that the defense's strategy failed to convince the court, while the prosecution succeeded in depicting Eichmann as motivated, influential, dedicated to the mass murder of the Jews despite his low rank. In addition, three of the fifteen charges against Eichmann were for his membership in criminal organizations, among which included the SS. That was far from an effective acquittal strategy for the Waffen-SS despite what Bitterling chose to see.

Bitterling's rapid exchange of letters with Alfred Dregger demonstrated how close some prominent national conservative circles were to Nazis, their apologists, and like Bitterling himself, those who embodied both. Bitterling also called out the spokesman for the Lower Saxony Ministry of the Interior, Herr Wittenberg, who had spoken against the HIAG in a statement to the Hannover press. Bitterling asked Alfred Dregger "to find support in Bonn... to counter statements in connection with HIAG, Volksbund, and Galinski," the head of the Jewish community in West Berlin. Bitterling also singled out this last individual and claimed that he "and the Essel commemoration community, take issue with the special relationship of Galinski, a Jew, in connection with the SS and the combat divisions of the Waffen SS into account."⁶⁰⁸ In addition to his Antisemitism, Bitterling made constant reference to "re-educators" or West German activists and teachers who emphasized memory of the Holocaust, which he compared to Communist reeducation camps in Southeast Asia.

Bitterling's accusation of "re-educators influencing the youth" was interesting considering that Bitterling was also engaged in that same sort of activity. Bitterling wrote an opinion piece in the *Rheinische Post* on Nov 17 1986, where he referenced Ronald Reagan's

⁶⁰⁷ Letter from Customs Official Karl Heinz Bitterling to CDU fraction leader Dr. Alfred Dregger, 30.11.1986, BArch B 438/225.

⁶⁰⁸ Letter from Customs Official Karl Heinz Bitterling to CDU fraction leader Dr. Alfred Dregger, 30.11.1986, BArch B 438/225.

visit to Bitburg and argued that if “honorable Waffen-SS soldiers were criminals, then so were all honorable Wehrmacht soldier, as well as their mothers and wives.”⁶⁰⁹ A 21 year old student wrote Bitterling a week later “I took note of your remarkable letter to the editor in the *Rheinische Post*. For me, the German soldier has always been a role model in terms of duty, camaraderie, honor and loyalty...we can make a small contribution to the recovery of our fatherland.”⁶¹⁰ Another young West German wrote Bitterling a post card, agreeing that it was “the left-liberal forces that belittle the heroism of the former soldiers of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS and want to see us Germans in penitential garb forever.”⁶¹¹ Far right commemoration was no longer limited to committed Nazis of the war generation. A passing of the torch of sorts was already underway. A significant increase in membership among far-right political parties occurred in the late 1980s with the neo-Nazi affiliated NPD gaining nearly a quarter million members by 1987.⁶¹² The Holocaust denying *Republikaner* attracted large numbers of West German youth to vote it into the West Berlin senate and the European Parliament with 2 million votes in 1989.⁶¹³ Bitterling then described some of the other attendees of the ceremony in Essel, which included “young people of both sexes, which doesn't sit well with the teachers and re-educators,” and “former members of the British 11th Armored Division, who took part in the fighting around Allerbrücke,” also attended.⁶¹⁴

The inclusion of both German youth and allied veterans at far-right events such as the event in Essel demonstrated the disturbing ability of old and neo-Nazis to attract members and support outside their own ranks. Yet, this was not a new phenomenon. Some post-war

⁶⁰⁹ Karl Heinz Bitterling Leserbrief „Ehrenmal“ in *Rheinische Post* 17.11.1986, BArch B 438/225.

⁶¹⁰ Letter to Karl Heinz Bitterling, 23.11.1986, BArch B 438/225.

⁶¹¹ Postcard to Karl Heinz Bitterling, 17.11.1986, BArch B 438/225.

⁶¹² Richard Stöss, *Politics Against Democracy: Right-Wing Extremism in West Germany*, German Studies Series (Berg, 1991), 147.

⁶¹³ Richard Stöss, *Politics Against Democracy: Right-Wing Extremism in West Germany*, German Studies Series (Berg, 1991), 205.

⁶¹⁴ Letter from Customs Official Karl Heinz Bitterling to CDU fraction leader Dr. Alfred Dregger, 30.11.1986, BArch B 438/225.

veteran organizations in Britain, France, and the United States often formed a conservative bulwark in their respective societies, and shared similar notions of anti-Communism, Antisemitism, and honor through combat as Wehrmacht, or even Waffen-SS veterans. Former admiral of the German navy, Gottfried Hansen became president of the largest veteran organization in West Germany in 1951, *Verband deutscher Soldaten* (Association of German Soldiers). Until his retirement in 1956, successfully won the support of the American and British Legions in petitioning the early release and clemency of Nazi war criminals, such as Werner Best and Hermann-Bernhard Ramcke held in French prisons.⁶¹⁵ He also maintained an active correspondence with the Volksbund on this topic. If former adversaries can lend legal and political support to one another barely a decade after the war, then they could certainly commemorate each other's fallen thirty to forty years thereafter. Far-right veteran circles had quietly carved out their own commemorative spaces and built support networks well before the rise of the Neo-Nazi movement.

The Volksbund leadership was at least somewhat aware of this activity, even if they distanced themselves from it. General Secretary Adolf Barth wrote Karl Heinz Bitterling six months after the near disaster at the 1985 *Volkstrauertag* in Essel. It was in response to a letter where Bitterling complained about the Volksbund's inability to ban the protestors from Essel.⁶¹⁶ Barth defended the decisions of the local officials to limit access to the military cemetery on Volkstrauertag due to the "high probability of physical violence against the participants in a commemoration hour."⁶¹⁷ Barth claimed falsely that "the participants in the commemoration hours in Essel are flatly defamed as neo-Nazis, fascists or right-wing

⁶¹⁵ Correspondence between Gottfried Hansen and the American and British Legions 1954-1956, BArch N 810/209.

⁶¹⁶ Letter from Volksbund Bezirksverband Hannover to Karl Heinz Bitterling, 09.05.1986, BArch B 438/225.

⁶¹⁷ Letter from Volksbund Bezirksverband Hannover to Karl Heinz Bitterling, 09.05.1986, BArch B 438/225.

extremists or described as counterdemonstrators is unfortunately not limited to this case.”⁶¹⁸ Barth then added this caveat. “We the Volksbund can only counter these accusations with factual arguments if the organization of former soldiers in Essel and other places prevent any participation of right-wing extremist groups in their memorial service.”⁶¹⁹ In essence, The Volksbund was ironically asking a former member of the Waffen-SS, and other older Nazis, to keep right-wing extremists out of their commemoration ceremonies so they can better defend them publicly. On November 6, 1986, the Volksbund sent a thank you letter to Karl Heinz Bitterling for his yearly contribution, signed by Adolf Barth, the General Secretary of the Volksbund.⁶²⁰

The controversies with HIAG and in Essel in the mid-1980s revealed some serious blind spots in the Volksbund’s post-war commemorative project. These revelations brought much embarrassment to the organization, which lost support from mostly smaller, left leaning or Jewish organizations that had associated with the Volksbund since the election of Willi Thiele and its new commemorative adjustment in 1970. In 1980, the Volksbund had 500,000 members and only 300,000 members by 1986 – the fastest and greatest loss of membership in its history.⁶²¹ The Volksbund had inadvertently made space for right wing commemorations – literally in the case of Essel and likely in other small communities – through their commemorative approach to *Volkstrauertag*, making it possible for commemorations outside the main ceremony in Bonn to avoid recognition of Nazi victims altogether. Alfred Dregger’s keynote speech in 1986 demonstrated that even the Bundestag could make space for apologist narratives. Over the course of the post war decades, older Nazis had plenty opportunity to use

⁶¹⁸ Letter from Volksbund Bezirksverband Hannover to Karl Heinz Bitterling, 09.05.1986, BArch B 438/225.

⁶¹⁹ Letter from Volksbund Bezirksverband Hannover to Karl Heinz Bitterling, 09.05.1986, BArch B 438/225.

⁶²⁰ Letter from Volksbund GS A. Barth to Karl Heinz Bitterling, 06.11.1986, BArch B 438/225.

⁶²¹ Bernd Ulrich, Christian Fuhrmeister, Manfred Hettling, and Wolfgang Kruse. *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Entwicklungslinien und Probleme* (Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2019), 493.

Volkstrauertag as an opportunity to influence the next generation of Neo-Nazis. The Federal Government and the established churches had as much a hand in the universalizing “All Victims Together” approach as the Volksbund. In the end, the Federal Government in Bonn and the major churches maintained their unwavering support, putting little pressure on the Volksbund to change. The Volksbund, by the end of the Cold War and despite rhetorical overtures to all political parties and a few genuine attempts of adapting to a new memorial culture the 1960s and 70s, completed the full circle back to their original membership base of the 1950s. These members were at best national and religious conservatives and at worst right-wing apologists for Nazi crimes.

Completing the reversal of Willi Thiele’s reforms, the Volksbund no longer engaged its readership critically on the atrocities and genocidal actions of German armed forces in its publications. On the first page of the 1988 issue of *Stimme und Weg*, Volksbund’s main periodical, the total loss of human life for both world wars is broken down by nation, then by military and civilian losses. For Germany, which includes Austria, civilian losses are broken down further into “Losses of German Civilians -500,000,” “Civilian loss through Expulsion and Abduction – 2,251,000,” and “Losses of German Civilians through political, racial, and religious persecution – 300,000.” Moreover, the entirety of Southern and Eastern Europe (Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, etc.), with the exception of the Soviet Union, are lumped into two categories for military and civilian deaths, which are 1,000,000 and 8,010,000 respectively. The Soviet Union’s losses are quoted at 13,700,000 and 6,000,000.⁶²² Without breaking down the civilian losses like they did with German losses, all civilian losses were presented as having been inflicted through bombing raids and combat – effectively erasing the Holocaust outside of Germany, and even that was minimized by sharing a category with

⁶²² “Menschenverluste beider Weltkriege“ in *Kriegsgräberfürsorge Stimme und Weg*, Jahrgang 1988, pg. 2, BArch DO 4/1108.

the politically and religiously persecuted. 300,000 was quite a deflated number, especially when set against the 2,251,000 Germans supposedly killed through expulsion across Eastern Europe, inflated from the 500,000 number on which most historians agree.⁶²³

This publication was not a one-off case, as these statistics are featured in nearly all issues of *Stimme und Weg* through the 1980s and early 1990s. These same numbers appeared as late as a 2005 Volksbund publication titled *Narben bleiben: die Arbeit der Suchdienste, 60 Jahre nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, a commemorative book on the work of the Volksbund and the German Red Cross's search service in locating and identifying missing Wehrmacht remains, co-written with the Wehrmacht central archive in Berlin (WASSt).⁶²⁴ Through this distortion, the Nazis' war of annihilation becomes an unfortunate bleeding of Europe's nations, comparable to the First World War and the Napoleonic Wars, missing the racialized and genocidal context that drove Hitler's war of aggression.

One opinion piece featured in the 1989 issue of *Stimme und Weg* made a similar connection.

The question that arises here is why we Germans, even as a divided nation, cannot achieve a similarly relaxed, self-evident national consciousness as our European neighbors. Shouldn't we Germans also be a bit proud of having made a significant contribution to Western culture? Can't we take our national history as it was, great as well as bad? Our French neighbor celebrated the 200th anniversary of his "Great Revolution" with a lot of effort and even more euphoria ate her own children before she brought forth a Napoleon who, like Adolf Hitler, covered the whole of Europe (even as far as Moscow) with a

⁶²³ See: Pertti Ahonen, *After the Expulsion: West Germany and Eastern Europe, 1945-1990* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 21; Ingo Haar, "Herausforderung Bevölkerung: zu Entwicklungen des modernen Denkens über die Bevölkerung vor, Im und nach dem Dritten Reich" in *Zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte der deutschen Opferangaben aus Flucht und Vertreibung*, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften 2007, 207; Rüdiger Overmans, "Personelle Verluste der deutschen Bevölkerung durch Flucht und Vertreibung," *Dzieje Najnowsze*, 26 (1994), 51-65; The German Historical Museum puts the figure at 600,000, maintaining that the figure of 2 million deaths in the previous government studies cannot be supported. Willi Kammerer's *Narben Bleiben: Die Arbeit Der Suchdienste 60 Jahre Nach Dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, co-published by the Volksbund in 2005, still insists on 2 million German deaths due to expulsion.

⁶²⁴ Kammerer, Anja, Willi Kammerer and Deutsche Dienststelle für die Benachrichtigung der Nächsten Angehörigen von Gefallenen der Ehemaligen Deutschen Wehrmacht (WASSt), *Narben Bleiben: Die Arbeit Der Suchdienste 60 Jahre Nach Dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, (Kassel, 2005), 12.

chain of terrible wars of aggression, left no shadow over the anniversary celebrations.⁶²⁵

The author of this piece wanted a normalization of German history similar conservative actors of the 1980s such as historian Ernst Nolte or chancellor Helmut Kohl. The Volksbund did not return to the exact same commemorative rhetoric prior to Willie Thiele's election in 1970 but adapted his new course to conservative attitudes of the 1980s.

Most issues of *Stimme und Weg* featured stories on the concentration camp survivors and the horrors inflicted there by Nazi guards, but still only through a nationalist lens. In another case from 1988, while the Volksbund, with assistance from Chancellor Kohl, sought reconciliation with Poland, *Stimme und Weg* devoted much of its 1988 issue to presenting the experiences of a Pole with German ancestry named Konstany Wollboldt, who suffered at Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen, and Neuengamme before dying shortly after liberation. The Volksbund emphasized its role in connecting with Wollboldt's surviving family in Poland through its partnership with the International Red Cross.⁶²⁶ The use of Bergen-Belsen, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, and other former concentration camps as labor camps for political prisoners and POWs, where tens of thousands perished from disease, exhaustion, hunger, and torture is emphasized while their contributing role to the systematic exploitation and murder of those considered racially inferior by the Nazis is at best subtly included – the 1989 issue included a picture of the Israeli monument commemorating Jewish victims of Bergen-Belsen with visible Hebrew characters, but no accompanying caption – and at worst fully ignored, which was the case for most issues.⁶²⁷

Where the Volksbund failed in engaging its largely conservative readership and members on the racial and Antisemitic nature of Nazi persecution, they succeeded in at least

⁶²⁵ "Die Tragische Generation," in *Kriegsgräberfürsorge Stimme und Weg*, Jahrgang 1989, pg. 13, BArch DO 4/1108.

⁶²⁶ "Leid ist International," *Kriegsgräberfürsorge Stimme und Weg*, Jahrgang 1988, pg. 7, BArch DO 4/1108.

⁶²⁷ *Kriegsgräberfürsorge Stimme und Weg*, Jahrgang 1989, pg. 19, BArch DO 4/1108.

linking commemoration with pacifism and distancing itself from Germany's hyper nationalist past. The same contributor who equated Hitler to Napoleon in 1989 also had this to say:

I believe that we Germans should be very careful when using terms such as national pride, nationalism, etc. Our generation in particular, which grew up in the spirit of excessive nationalism, has felt the consequences firsthand. Do you remember it, you Hitler boys, you BDM girls from back then? 'Raise the flags in the east wind'... 'Holy Fatherland in danger'... 'Germany must live even if we have to die' etc. Some of us may still be moved today by a certain feeling of 'nostalgic demonism,' a wonder at how seriously such sayings were taken.⁶²⁸

The 1990 issue of *Stimme und Weg* emphasized the historical and cultural significance of German reunification, finally accessing the 172,000 war graves of the former GDR, and broader access to grave sites across former Eastern bloc nations, but also tempered any nationalist illusions of reclaiming the "lost German East." Friedrich-Albert Hahnenfeld, a prominent Volksbund member who took part in negotiations with the Soviet Red Cross wrote, "the loss of the old German territories beyond the Oder and Neisse is irrevocable. It is also about maintaining world peace. Only the pain of the lost homeland and the homesickness for it remained... It should prompt us to reflect and act as a reminder to have more humanity and understanding for our neighbors, for other peoples." Volksbund President Hans-Otto Weber also made clear what the Volksbund's role would be within a larger and undivided European community and why as many Germans as possible should join the organization.⁶²⁹

The expellee community in West Germany had made up a considerable portion of the

⁶²⁸ "Die Tragische Generation," in *Kriegsgräberfürsorge Stimme und Weg*, Jahrgang 1989, pg. 13, BArch DO 4/1108.

⁶²⁹ "Revolution in Osteuropa hat Folgen für die Kriegsgräberfürsorge," in *Kriegsgräberfürsorge Stimme und Weg*, Jahrgang 1990, pg. 44, BArch DO 4/1108. Interestingly, the Volksbund often placed the American Civil War as a model for their slogan "Versöhnung über den Gräbern" and the looked to establishment of national cemeteries in the United States as a model to follow. Its leaders, such as President Hans Otto Weber and General Manager Hans Soltau drew comparisons in some of their letters and essays. Given the long (and ongoing) history of Civil War remembrance and faulty basis on which the Northern and Southern states reconciled, ie. acceptance Jim Crow laws, The Lost Cause, and suppression of Black emancipation as core aspects of post-reconstruction America, the Volksbund's adulation of this history is both ironic and telling of the Volksbund's self-understanding within the context of post-war Germany. "Brief an OKR Echternach Kanzlei der EKD Hannover von Hans Soltau des VDKs den 30.01.1988," EZA 2/17669.

Volksbund's base, but Volksbund's publications and forums created a discourse that allowed some within these conservative and often recalcitrant circles to reflect on Germany's imperialist past and its future place in Europe. When German reunification became a possibility after the fall of the Berlin Wall, most expellees within the Volksbund abandoned pressing for territorial claims and the nostalgic rhetoric around the lost "homeland in the East."⁶³⁰

This development was not unlike the post-war Japanese government's achievement in integrating pacifist values into its public education while eliding larger discussions of Japanese atrocities by the imperial army.⁶³¹ Japanese citizens became passive victims of imperial Japan's own authoritarianism and militarism rather than active perpetrators of crimes against neighboring East Asian and Pacific peoples. This government policy stood in contrast with the work of activists, historians, and those from Japan's political left, who have a long history of being kept out of positions of political power. Through much of the post-war era, scholars had revered West, and later reunified, Germany's process of coming to terms with its past as a model example, while criticizing the seeming inability of other countries – Japan in particular – to confront its past national crimes. One must not take for granted the memory work of West and East German activists, scholars, and politicians in confronting Nazi crimes shifting emphasis to the memory of the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes, but this cannot be understood as the only development in German national memory. Conservative circles of German society did not just melt away in the face of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* but remained quite entrenched in more ways than most post-war historians have observed. In this way, German memory politics bear more resemblance to other national contexts where large segments of their populations deny or elide uncomfortable conversations about the past,

⁶³⁰ "Revolution in Osteuropa hat Folgen für die Kriegsgräberfürsorge," in *Kriegsgräberfürsorge Stimme und Weg*, Jahrgang 1990, pg. 44, BArch DO 4/1108.

⁶³¹ See: Akiko Hashimoto, *The Long Defeat: Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Japan* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

such as Japan, the United States, and most other nation-states.⁶³² Much like these societies, the Volksbund's commemorative approach did little to produce a consensual memory culture around defeat, but rather a divided public discourse that had little in common with one another.

Reunification proved to be enough of a boost to the Volksbund that it could now abandon efforts to merge *Volkstrauertag* with other church holidays. The outpouring of German nationalism signaled to the Volksbund that they did not need to merge its commemorative interests with those of the Catholic or Protestant churches. Volksbund president Weber justified the shift in a meeting with the East German *Vertrauenspfarrer* after reunification.

Since the terror in Hitler's time had a total character, the Volksbund does not differentiate between different groups of victims of war and tyranny war dead, resistance fighters, perished refugees, in captivity and in camps of all kinds deceased. In order to preserve the special character of *Volkstrauertag*, a possible shift to *Buß und Betttag* or *Totensonntag* is not envisaged.⁶³³

The Volksbund felt more secure in its “all victims together” approach to create a useable, nationalist form of commemoration for a unified Germany. Much like the logic of the Volksbund leadership in during its debates around *Volkstrauertag* in the 1950s, the Volksbund wanted to retain the unique experience of wartime suffering rather than lose it to religious timelessness.

In his own attempt to create a useable, national past for West Germans to celebrate, Chancellor Helmut Kohl attended the 70th anniversary celebration of the founding of the Volksbund on May 3, 1989. He delivered the keynote speech and praised the Volksbund's “quiet and persistent” way of working and contributions to “new works of peace, day after

⁶³² Hashimoto, *The Long Defeat*, 123.

⁶³³ Vermerk über die Dienstbesprechung des VDKs am 09.11.1990 im Sekretariat des Bundes der Evang. Kirche in Berlin, EZA 110/2.

day.”⁶³⁴ He also underscored that “[the Volksbund’s] humanitarian work represents an urgent and enduring admonition for peace, a call for understanding and reconciliation between peoples.”⁶³⁵ Chancellor Kohl then switched to addressing all West Germans.

This year we will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the Second World War. It will once again become clear: we accept our history without ifs and buts - with its great, but also with its terrible sides. None of us can and may choose individual parts of it or displace others. The memory of the horrors of war and tyranny in particular sharpens awareness of the irreplaceable value of democratic freedom - and at the same time it includes the warning to resist totalitarian temptation in any form. No more war, no more tyranny - that was the solemn promise made by the founders of our Federal Republic in Germany forty years ago and which is expressed in decisive passages in our constitution. This promise is part of the moral foundation of our free community, and we have repeatedly affirmed it.⁶³⁶

Kohl made clear that West Germans should not shy away from Germany’s dark past, but that there should be a constructive use in the present. His approach was to establish a link between the Nazi past and his decidedly anti-Communist stance in the present moment. In stark contrast to SPD chancellors Brandt and Schmidt, who saw the Volksbund’s message as a way to reach out to the peoples of Eastern Europe, Kohl underscored how the Volksbund’s commemorative work was another way contrast the continuity of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe with West German democracy. Chancellor Kohl focused the rest of his speech on praising the “peace education” of the Volksbund through their youth projects. Since 1953, the Volksbund worked with secondary schools to promote an anti-war education, and organized trips where German youth toured the German World War cemeteries of France, Italy, and the Benelux states. The Volksbund also organized seminars for German youth to meet and discuss the war with their peers in Western Europe. Kohl concluded his speech in the hope that this success will soon be replicated in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland. His

⁶³⁴ “Rede von Bundeskanzler Dr. Helmut Kohl anlässlich des 70-jährigen Bestehens des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge am 3. Mai 1989 in Bonn,” BArch B 136/24977.

⁶³⁵ “Rede von Bundeskanzler Dr. Helmut Kohl anlässlich des 70-jährigen Bestehens des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge am 3. Mai 1989 in Bonn,” BArch B 136/24977.

⁶³⁶ “Rede von Bundeskanzler Dr. Helmut Kohl anlässlich des 70-jährigen Bestehens des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge am 3. Mai 1989 in Bonn,” BArch B 136/24977.

conclusion was a subtle argument that West Germans have already changed and were ready to reconcile, but it was up to Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe to make the next move.⁶³⁷ Given the controversies and persistence of right-wing commemoration within West Germany presented in this chapter, Chancellor Kohl may not have been referring to all Germans.

The final breakthrough with Poland on the war graves question came only the first meeting of the German Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl with the first non-Communist Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki on November 14th, 1989. The meeting had been delayed five days due to the unexpected fall of the Berlin Wall on the ninth. Along with a joint resolution on the normalization of relations between West Germany and Poland, the two leaders signed an intergovernmental agreement on the issue of war graves care. It read: “Both sides agree that the possibility of visiting, preserving, and caring for the graves of the dead of the wars is of decisive importance because it directly affects people's feelings... A working group has been formed to carry out the necessary preliminary work should. This is a first step towards restoring and preserving the German war graves within Polish territory.”⁶³⁸ Additionally, the agreement proclaimed that the care of German war graves and the effort to clarify the fates of still missing soldiers “was to become a new basis for direct relationship between the two peoples.”⁶³⁹

After the summit, West Germany and Poland set up a German-Polish working group consisting of members from both states' Red Crosses, the Volksbund, and the Polish Ministry of Regional Planning, now delegated responsible for dealing with all other questions relating to German war graves care in Poland. The Volksbund received the sole responsibility for the registration of all accessible German war graves in Poland within the working group,

⁶³⁷ “Rede von Bundeskanzler Dr. Helmut Kohl anlässlich des 70-jährigen Bestehens des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge am 3. Mai 1989 in Bonn,” BArch B 136/24977.

⁶³⁸ “Kriegsgräberfürsorge Stimme und Weg,” 66 Jahrgang, 2, Juli 1990, S. 22, BArch DO 4/1108.

⁶³⁹ “Kriegsgräberfürsorge Stimme und Weg,” 66 Jahrgang, 2, Juli 1990, S. 22, BArch DO 4/1108.

including German military cemeteries from the First World War and previous conflicts.⁶⁴⁰ Surviving German expellees of the former Eastern territories of Germany were left out of the agreement, and outside the Volksbund's self-defined purview. The Volksbund had relied on support from the expellee community for decades, but the windfall that the dramatic changes across Europe in 1989 and 1990 created for the Volksbund in its larger goal of accessing and preserving German war graves. Much as chancellor Helmut Kohl had done in his pursuit of German reunification, the Volksbund abandoned expellee demands of revising Poland's western border for more achievable and larger goals.⁶⁴¹ At any rate, the easing of travel between Germany and Poland over the following year, as Cold War tensions melted away, made initiatives from private individuals possible if they wished to visit their previous hometowns in Poland as personal vacations.

In the end, it was not a shift in the Volksbund's commemorative approach, nor a broader policy of reconciliation between West Germany and Poland that brought a solution to the war graves question. Much like East Germany, Poland up to the fall of state socialism showed little interest in changing its position. Yet the intransigence of the Polish state and citizens towards the issue of German war graves was matched by the unwillingness of the Volksbund to adapt their commemorative approach to Polish sensitivities. Organizations such as *Aktion Sühnezeichen* and *Zeichen der Hoffnung – Znaki Nadziei* e.V. provided a model through more overt displays of spiritual atonement for collective German crimes against the Polish people. They made considerable progress with Polish Catholics and nationalist leaders outside of the regime. Yet, this approach would have required unacceptable concessions on the part of the Volksbund: partnering with the politically left-wing ASZ and accepting the label of "perpetrators" rather than "victims" or even "co-victims" for German war dead. The

⁶⁴⁰ "Kriegsgräberfürsorge Stimme und Weg," 66 Jahrgang, 2, Juli 1990, S. 20, BArch DO 4/1108.

⁶⁴¹ Pertti Ahonen, *After the Expulsion: West Germany and Eastern Europe, 1945-1990* (Oxford University Press, 2003) 262-3.

collapse of the Communist regime in Warsaw, German reunification, and public focus in Poland shifting to the crimes of the Red Army and Stalinism against Polish citizens created a political environment where the Volksbund's approach to commemoration – reconciling through multi-nationalist commemorations rather than addressing specific war time atrocities – became acceptable only through sheer historical conjuncture.

The Final breakthroughs with the Soviet Union

Despite the breakthroughs with the Soviet Union over the care of German war graves in the 1970s, renewed East-West tensions in the early 1980s threatened to undo it all. During a meeting between representatives of the Soviet Red Cross, the Volksbund including then President Eduard Hasskamp, and the West German embassy in Moscow on July 8, 1983, questions of security and nuclear threat hung over the negotiations. The NATO double track position, as well as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, had eroded the trust that had been built between East and West under Détente. The representative of the Soviet Red Cross identified as Reshetov situated the conversation around “the events of big politics,”⁶⁴² first mentioning the meeting between Kohl and Andropov and describing West German-Soviet relations as negative. Reshetov then returned to the concerns of the Volksbund, and thanked President Hasskamp for the list of names of Soviet war dead who are buried in Saarland. Hasskamp explained that the Volksbund is ready to share lists of Soviet war dead from other West German states, with the next available being from the Rhineland Palatinate. Hasskamp then asked, “whether it can be expected that further German prison cemeteries will be free for visits and possibly for care and asks for your understanding for our insistence.”⁶⁴³ Reshetov answered, “we, the Soviet Red Cross, do not manage the cemeteries. The local authorities are

⁶⁴² “Ergebnisniederschrift, 08.07.1983,” BArch B 136/29687.

⁶⁴³ “Ergebnisniederschrift, 08.07.1983,” BArch B 136/29687.

responsible for this. It took a long time to be able to release information on three cemeteries... we have no knowledge of other German prisoners.”⁶⁴⁴

Reshetov then tried to connect war graves with rising nuclear tensions. He explained, “every Soviet family suffered a casualty in the last war. If the Federal Republic of Germany were to set up nuclear missiles aimed at the Soviet Union, then the Soviet Union would also have to respond accordingly. I cannot and do not want to question the sub-organizations and local authorities.”⁶⁴⁵ Another Volksbund representative named Graf Lambsdorff replied that,

the Kohl-Andropov talks must be assessed in a differentiated manner. It is true that no agreement has been reached on the deployment of nuclear missiles. However, both countries could very well work together in other areas...If concrete results and commitments cannot be achieved today on certain issues, one must patiently wait for the time that is suitable for further progress.⁶⁴⁶

The meeting was much more tense than the previous year. Neither side could escape the influence of “big politics” on the war graves question. President Hasskamp attempted to steer the conversation back to pushing for more information on POW graves, but Reshetov did not budge. Not until relations improved between Bonn and Moscow would any more information on POW or war graves be released. The negotiations ended without any real agreements, but mutual assurances to keep the dialogue open.⁶⁴⁷

The Volksbund sent its assessment of the meeting to the Foreign Office in Bonn and attempted to put a positive, if questionable, spin on the outcome by praising the persistence of the Volksbund officials: “It is unlikely that more can be achieved at the present time. But personal relations with the representatives of the Soviet Red Cross have been relaxed - one might almost say paradoxically - by the firm attitude in the behavior and in the matter of Graf Lambsdorff and President Hasskamp.”⁶⁴⁸ The Volksbund and the Foreign Office must have

⁶⁴⁴ “Ergebnisniederschrift, 08.07.1983,” BArch B 136/29687.

⁶⁴⁵ “Ergebnisniederschrift, 08.07.1983,” BArch B 136/29687.

⁶⁴⁶ “Ergebnisniederschrift, 08.07.1983,” BArch B 136/29687.

⁶⁴⁷ “Ergebnisniederschrift, 08.07.1983,” BArch B 136/29687.

⁶⁴⁸ Letter from Volksbund Director Adolf Barth to Legation Council Dr. Kroneck, 22.07.1983, BArch B 136/29687.

felt that the ball was in the Soviet Red Cross's court to make the next move and to start a new round of talks. Five years passed before any new developments came. The already opened POW cemeteries at Krasnogorsk, Ljublino, and Tambow remained open to German tourists and the Volksbund in the meantime.

Finally in August 1988, the Volksbund received a promising declaration from the Riga City Committee via the Foreign Office in Bonn and the Consulate General in Leningrad. The declaration approved the reburial of 433 deceased German prisoners of war in a permanent war cemetery within the city of Riga. The Volksbund contacted the Soviet Red Cross to continue the talks about German war graves care in the Soviet Union considering this new development.⁶⁴⁹ However, some bad news followed when the new president of the Volksbund, Hans Otto-Weber traveled to the Soviet Red Cross in Moscow. He described the encounter in a letter to Chancellor Kohl on November 8, 1988. "During my conversation with representatives of the Soviet Red Cross in Moscow on October 26, 1988, they, including the first deputy chairman of the SRC, stated that the Soviet Red Cross no longer saw itself as the Soviet interlocutor responsible for questions relating to Volksbund. In the future, the Volksbund should turn to the responsible regional soviets." This announcement came as a surprise to the Volksbund and perceived it as a step backwards.

In previous examples from Eastern Europe, the Volksbund sought non-state partners and those at the local level. In the Soviet Union, besides the Baltic republics, there was no Catholic or Protestant presence, nor a sizeable German speaking population with which it could engage. It also understood the Soviet Union to be an authoritarian, bureaucratic state where the only successful initiatives were those supported by high-ranking Communist party officials in Moscow, or better yet, the General Secretary – such as when Leonid Brezhnev

⁶⁴⁹ "Kurzgefasster Situationsbericht über deutsche Kriegsgräber im Osten/Südostn Europas sowie in der DDR," 26.08.1988, BArch B 136/29687.

named the Volksbund an official partner to the Soviet Red Cross in 1980. The Volksbund leaders had no problem working with local governments in places such as Riga, where they presumed a more pro-western attitude. But in small rural towns of the Russian, Belorussian, and Ukrainian countryside, where the vast majority of German war graves resided, the Volksbund expected difficulty. Soviet officials, including the Red Cross, had insisted for years that the Soviet peoples and local officials in charge of the districts where German war graves were located had no interest in promoting their preservation and commemoration.

In November 1988, Volksbund President Weber asked the West German government to intervene once again on its behalf. In a letter to Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Weber took a distraught tone: “we are forced to accept the announcement made by the Soviet Red Cross in Moscow that they no longer want to negotiate with the Volksbund as a fact. Basically, the Volksbund is back exactly where it was before 1982, i.e. before the start of official talks with the Soviet Red Cross.” Having to seek out support among regional Soviet bureaucrats, famous for intransigence and redundant jurisdictional duties, was an impossible task for the Volksbund. President Weber asked Chancellor Kohl “to help the Volksbund in finding a new central interlocutor in the Soviet Union... for far more expedience within that hierarchical structure...who would, in turn, forward our request to the locally responsible Soviet authorities with approval.”⁶⁵⁰

The Kohl government, which had been building a strong rapport with General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, delivered the Volksbund’s request in a swift manner. President Weber wrote to Chancellor Kohl a month later in December 1988, thanking him for his direct intervention on behalf of the Volksbund, which led to a meeting in the Soviet embassy in Bonn on December 14. Weber continued, “As a result, [Soviet] Ambassador Julij

⁶⁵⁰ Letter from Volksbund President Hans-Otto Weber to Chancellor Helmut Kohl, 08.11.1988, BArch B 136/29687.

Kwinzinskij [to West Germany] promised to name a contact person for the Volksbund who would be responsible for German war graves care in the Soviet Union in the near future.”⁶⁵¹

Secretary General Gorbachev’s efforts to reform the Soviet Union and integrate it into a larger European community helped to rapidly accelerate the West German Chancellery and Volksbund’s plans for expanded access in the Soviet Union. On April 21, 1989, Volksbund President Weber handed over lists with the names of the graves of around 340,000 Soviet war dead buried in West Germany to the Soviet Embassy. This type of exchanged was one the Volksbund had promised to fulfill since the 1950s, but only followed through with thirty years later once access to German graves on Soviet territory was all but assured. Meetings in Riga on May 10th and 11th soon followed between the Volksbund and city officials about the maintenance and care of the German military cemeteries that still existed in the city area.⁶⁵²

Volksbund President Weber wrote to Chancellor Kohl again on June 19, 1989, congratulating him on a successful state visit from Secretary General Gorbachev, adding:

The German-Soviet rapprochement, which is so important for our country and which our people regard with so much approval and sympathy, and the visible confidence-building between our two states are your personal merit. The Volksbund has a significant share in the result. We owe the release of four more German military cemeteries in the USSR for visits by relatives starting in October to your commitment. With their reports, the media have aroused a lot of attention and gratitude in our population. Of course, I am very happy about that.⁶⁵³

During the Kohl-Gorbachev summit in Bonn June 12-13th, where Gorbachev spoke of building “a common European home” and the two discussed relations between the superpowers, East Germany, and continued democratic reform efforts in Poland and Hungary, Chancellor Kohl approached the question of German war graves in the Soviet

⁶⁵¹ Letter from Volksbund President Hans-Otto Weber to Chancellor Helmut Kohl, 17.12.1988, BArch B 136/29687.

⁶⁵² “Deutsche Kriegsgräber in der Sowjetunion,“ Bericht des Bundeskanzleramtes, Bonn 30.05.1989, BArch B 136/29687.

⁶⁵³ Letter from Volksbund President Hans-Otto Weber to Chancellor Helmut Kohl, 19.06.1989, BArch B 136/29687.

Union as well as the fate of those missing since the war. Similar to his predecessor Willy Brandt, Kohl perceived the war graves issue as another area where European integration was possible. Gorbachev agreed to a gradual opening of additional memorial sites, which his diplomatic team translated into opening four more cemeteries in the Soviet Union near former POW camps for visitation. The Chancellor “thanked Secretary General Gorbachev for this and for the good and close cooperation in the care of war graves.”⁶⁵⁴ At the same time, he expressed his confidence that “the responsible German and Soviet authorities would continue their close and trusting cooperation and clarify the fates of other missing persons.” Other topics of conversation: release of ethnic German re-settlers from Soviet citizenship; permission for expellees to visit the northern part of East Prussia, which became incorporated into Russia; the rehabilitation of criminally convicted German prisoners of war; and finally, the fate of Raoul Wallenberg.⁶⁵⁵

The effects of this summit on the Volksbund were immediate. The cities of Riga, Minsk, and Kyiv invited the Volksbund to survey their long since abandoned war grave sites – German, Lithuanian, Belorussian, and Ukrainian – in over the fall and spring of 1989 and 1990.⁶⁵⁶ In the spirit of *Glasnost*, the Soviet Union’s western republics began to recover its histories of national, anti-Communist struggle during the Second World War. Many of these

⁶⁵⁴ Vermerk über das Staatsbesuch Generalsekretär Gorbatschows, 27.06.1989, BArch B 136/29687.

⁶⁵⁵ Raoul Wallenberg was the Swedish ambassador to Hungary during the Second World War used his diplomatic status, connections, and Swedish neutrality to provide Jews with fake passports and escape Nazi persecution. When the Red Army captured Budapest in February 1945, Wallenberg was arrested on suspicions of espionage due to connections to Western intelligence agents. He disappeared in the Soviet GULAG system and presumed dead by 1952 even as the Soviet Union refused to admit to ever having him in custody. He is presumed to have died of a heart attack while in prison, but the exact circumstances of his death remain uncertain. See: Vermerk über das Staatsbesuch Generalsekretär Gorbatschows, 27.06.1989, BArch B 136/29687.

⁶⁵⁶ “Protokoll der Dienstbesprechung der gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge am 24.04.1990 in Berlin,” EZA 110/116; For context on both the impact of Glasnost on the nationalist movements within the Soviet republics, and the revival of nationalist histories in the Soviet Western Republics, see: Walter Laqueur, *Stalin: The Glasnost Revelations* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1990); David Pryce-Jones, *The Strange Death of the Soviet Empire* (Metropolitan Books, 1995). Gale Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Collapse and Rebirth in Eastern Europe*. 2 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011);

dead fighters, many of whom collaborated with the Nazis in various atrocities ended up in the same long since abandoned war grave sites as fallen German soldiers. In the spirit of reclaiming national pasts and integrating into an undivided Europe, these aligned interests made the Volksbund the ideal partner for the non-Russian peoples of the Baltic, Belorussian, and Ukrainian republics. Interestingly, no Russian-majority city or republic invited the Volksbund. Russians had long since cultivated their own commemorative culture around the “Great Patriotic War” and still had many misgivings of German memorials popping up next to their own modest war memorials. The Russian republic refused the Volksbund greater access to German war graves, besides the ones already granted by previous Soviet authorities. The Volksbund finally gained greater access after Germany signed a war graves agreement with the Russian Federation in 1992.

Saved By the *Mauerfall* – Ruptures in the Care of War Graves through Reunification

The War Graves Department’s experience under the final years of East German state socialism was defined by increasing state efforts to erase war graves. One *Vertrauenspfarrer* reported in 1987 that “numerous war graves on both communal and church cemeteries have been erased and cannot be undone.”⁶⁵⁷ The *Vertrauenspfarrer* recommended that the church in general, especially the War Graves Department, exercise caution in requesting communal authorities to give out information on missing and fallen soldiers and their living relatives. “If the request originated from a relative, there was no problem, nor if the church deals with only individual cases.”⁶⁵⁸ They insisted that they should not send a list of names with requests for information, as it would raise suspicions and officials would be less willing to cooperate. Group requests were more conspicuous and may raise questions from state officials, increasing the chance of interference. The War Graves Department also received an increase

⁶⁵⁷ Zweiter Teil, Protokoll der Arbeitsbesprechung der gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge am 09.04.1987, EZA 110/119.

⁶⁵⁸ Protokoll der Arbeitsbesprechung der gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge am 26.04.1984 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

in inquiries about visiting graves of loved ones in non-socialist countries. According to East German law, retirees could apply for such a trip and younger citizens only in certain urgent family matters could travel.⁶⁵⁹ This policy was a restriction meant to decrease emigration from East Germany, figuring retirees were less likely to defect. If they did defect, it was an acceptable loss. While requests for information on graves and remains continued to arrive from outside East Germany, the *Vertrauenspfarrer* noticed a steady drop in communication with East German families. The new leader of the War Graves Department succeeding Hans-Jürgen Behm, Walter Pabst commented during one meeting that the number of families in the GDR with whom there is contact decreases by around 100 each year.⁶⁶⁰ He added pessimistically “this work will be likely phased out by the end of our lifetimes.”⁶⁶¹ The increased struggle against the state combined with a sense among the *Vertrauenspfarrer* that, despite constant support from the war generation, their efforts may end when their generation dies out.

In response to this malaise, The Volksbund invested more of its attention and money into its project in East Germany. Starting in 1983, high ranking Volksbund officials journeyed to East Berlin yearly to meet with the *Vertrauenspfarrer*, which now included two women pastors Erdmute Labes and Beatrix Zastrow, and Walter Papst at the Lutheran War Graves Department. In one visit, Volksbund President Eduard Hasskamp explained that the executive board in Kassel still “placed high expectations on the War Graves Department due to the demand for information in the West and the amount of money they invest yearly.”⁶⁶²

⁶⁵⁹ Protokoll der Arbeitsbesprechung der gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge am 26.04.1984 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

⁶⁶⁰ Papst was a long time pastor of the confessing church who gained recognition among dissident circles for his opposition to reconciling Christianity with state socialism. His criticisms of Thuringian Bishop Moritz Mitzenheim, who attempted to reconcile the Lutheran church with state socialism, garnered him a reputation as a dissident. See: Findeis, Hagen und Detlef Pollack (Hgs.). *Selbstbewahrung oder Selbstverlust: Bischöfe und Repräsentanten der evangelischen Kirche in der DDR über ihr Leben*, (Berlin, 1999,) 178.

⁶⁶¹ Bericht 01.10.1983 zukünftige Struktur der Abt. Gräberfürsorge, EZA 110/1.

⁶⁶² Brief an Herrn Ziegler von Pabst den 01.08.1983, EZA 110/1.

The attendance of at least one high-ranking Volksbund leader to these meetings was becoming a regular occurrence, likely to demonstrate that Kassel was still invested in East Germany.⁶⁶³ Papst and the *Vertrauenspfarrer* organized several trips through the East German countryside in the late 1980s to demonstrate the success of their decades of work to the Volksbund. During a 1988 tour, the Volksbund leadership visited regions with the highest density of German war graves, mostly from last large battles of 1945: the Oder region, the Golm on the Baltic Coast, and Halbe, just South of East Berlin. Volksbund General Secretary Adolf Barth remarked during this trip that these scattered sites represented a fraction of the total German graves in the East Germany.⁶⁶⁴ While visiting, locals of nearby villages in the countryside met the tour group on many occasions and expressed their thankfulness that these cemeteries were finally well cared for and the names of the dead finally displayed.⁶⁶⁵ “For the rest [of the grave sites], it can be happily stated that some work is done in silence. Elderly people often carry out grave maintenance services on behalf of the unknown relatives.”⁶⁶⁶ Walter Papst explained to the Volksbund visitors that some older East Germans had long since taken the preservation of German war graves into their own hands – a phenomenon that had persisted since the early years of the German Democratic Republic. Pabst’s assumption that they were elderly was likely based on presumed personal connections to the war and the commemorative focus on war dead during the Nazi and Weimar eras.

In 1989, as state budgets ran massive deficits, some the *Vertrauenspfarrer* reported a dramatic increase in grave erasures. One pastor explained that in his region of Brandenburg, some communities were going to proceed with erasing graves due to a lack of money for maintenance but stopped once he was able to provide them with the funds needed. The

⁶⁶³ Brief an Herrn Ziegler von Pabst den 28.07.1983, EZA 110/1.

⁶⁶⁴ Brief von GS des VDKs Barth an OKR Pabst den 01.08.1988, EZA 110/2.

⁶⁶⁵ Vermerk über die Gräberfahrt am 16.09.1987 (von Frömke am 21.09 verfasst), EZA 110/119.

⁶⁶⁶ Zweiter Teil, Protokoll der Arbeitsbesprechung der gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge am 09.04.1987, EZA 110/119.

Volksbund increased its financial support so the *Vertrauenspfarrer* could provide these communities with necessary funds. The decision bought time, but the Volksbund realized that this might not be sustainable in the long term. The War Graves department estimated that 218,000 German victims of the Second World War were buried on 8045 cemeteries in the GDR, and that a quarter had been erased since the 1970s.⁶⁶⁷

The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, and the dramatic changes occurring across East Germany during the winter and spring of 1990 directly affected the work of the War Graves Department. The first meeting of the *Vertrauenspfarrer* after the *Wende* (turning point) took place on April 24, 1990, and included several high ranking Volksbund and East German Lutheran officials, including Volksbund President Otto Weber. Shortly before the events of November 9, Walter Pabst had retired and selected a trained Jurist named Thomas Sell to succeed him in leading the War Graves Department.⁶⁶⁸ Thomas Sell reported the immediate changes as a result of the *Wende* in November 1989. Some *Vertrauenspfarrer* and other usual church officials did not attend this meeting because they were attending Round Tables to facilitate the transition to democracy. Walter Pabst left his retirement to take part in these critical events. The Round Table meetings of early 1990 across East Germany, when activists and political leaders met to discuss democratic transition initially within state

⁶⁶⁷ The accuracy of this claim is difficult to assess. The *Vertrauenspfarrer* were not methodical in record keeping and statistics. They recorded the number of graves in locations for any given year but did not often list how this compared to past years and how many graves had been erased. The best documented cases are in Schwerin from the late 1960s and Eisleben in the 1980s. In Schwerin, about one thousand Wehrmacht graves were erased due to the Cemetery ordinance of 1965, which targeted war graves of the city proper. About 4000 graves continued to exist outside the city limits; "Abschrift – Oberkirchenrat Schwerin Betr: Kriegsgräberfelder von kirchlichen und kommunalen Friedhöfen 12.11.1965," EZA 104/1221. In Eisleben, a much smaller town, 55 of the 287 registered war graves, or about a fifth, were erased before *Vertrauenspfarrer* Walter Lohmann intervened in 1986; "Bericht über die im Kreis Eisleben angestellten Ermittlungen über noch vorhandene Gräber von Kriegstoten, Bezug Anfrage des Sekretariats des BEKs GF," EZA 110/120. The 176,000 figure for Second World War German dead in former East Germany is currently accepted by the Volksbund and used in its publications may represent a loss of 42,000 war graves during the GDR era. Pabst may have been including the numbers of war dead that had been lost through erasure efforts, but the claim of 218,000 is hard to verify. The few number sets the *Vertrauenspfarrer* did produce indicate roughly a 20% loss rather than a quarter.

⁶⁶⁸ Brief an die leitenden Verwaltungsdienststellen der Gliedkirchen des BEKs der DDR, an die gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge 14.09.1988, betr. Gräberfürsorge, EZA 110/2.

socialism, was a critical moment when democratic reform in East Germany became a real possibility.⁶⁶⁹ Pastors and church officials, because of their marginalization in the DDR often served as community interlocutors in negotiating a transition to democracy at the Round Tables and hoped to expand the role of the church in a more democratic society.⁶⁷⁰

As a demonstration of national excitement, more East Germans began to independently care for local German war graves outside the purview of the church. Sell commented that “only in a few cases in the past were they able to care for war graves on communal cemeteries, such as the case in Hötzelsrode where surviving relatives put enough pressure on local authorities.” After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the War Graves Department noticed much broader interest among East Germans in caring for and commemorating German war graves. The War Graves Department received a surplus of 10,000 DM which it put to refurbishing more sites that had been neglected. Thomas Sell listed dozens of sites as the recipients of the funding. Since November 1989, the department received 27,322.70 DM in donations from families, some of whom were children or grandchildren of the war generation. The largest single donation being 1000 DM. Along with travel inquiries, there was also a massive increase in requests for Grave ornaments and photographs of graves in Western Europe from East German citizens, noting the much younger age of the individuals wanting to visit gravesites in the West.⁶⁷¹ This increase was part of many East Germans’ attempt to reestablish connections with West Germany, the West, and visit the war grave of a

⁶⁶⁹ Heinrich August Winkler, “Accession or a New Constitution?,” in *Germany: The Long Road West* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 498-503; for the significant role played by the established churches in the so-called Peaceful Revolution, see: David Doellinger, “The Peaceful Revolutions,” *Turning Prayers into Protests: Religious-Based Activism and Its Challenge to State Power in Socialist Slovakia and East Germany* (Budapest, Hungary; New York, USA: Central European University Press, 2013)215-237.

⁶⁷⁰ Mary Fulbrook, “The End of the Dictatorship,” in *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1995) 243-268; Wendy Tyndale, “Seeds of the Revolution” and “Fall of the Berlin Wall and Hopes for the Future,” in *Protestants in Communist East Germany: In the Storm of the World* (Ashgate, 2010), 91-132.

⁶⁷¹ Protokoll der Dienstbesprechung der gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge am 24.04.1990 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

loved one – for many a long overdue chance to mourn a personal loss from the Second World War.

Volksbund General Secretary Adolf Barth soon addressed the future of the War Graves Department given the rapidly changing situation for the Volksbund across Europe. Barth stated that “the Volksbund is charged in the name of the Federal Government in Bonn to work primarily abroad, but the GDR will be an exception. The East is opening up more. The city of Riga asked the Volksbund to help with the restoration of a cemetery as had Kyiv... there is little animosity left.”⁶⁷² Barth explained that it was still difficult in Poland but noted that after Chancellor Kohl’s agreement with Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Warsaw agreed to allow the reburial of 2000 Wehrmacht soldiers scattered around the city’s outskirts, with other efforts underway. Barth continued that the “Volksbund has long considered the GDR *Inland*,” a German and yet foreign space, but since there was no existing War Graves treaty or agreement, the Volksbund leadership are not quite sure how to proceed.⁶⁷³ “The Volksbund does not want to lead you all by the hand but does want to establish new Regional branches in the DDR.”⁶⁷⁴

This statement was interesting in that the meeting participants never mentioned the reunification of the two Germanies but were already planning to replicate the Volksbund’s federal structure in East Germany. Reunification meant the fastest possible return for the Volksbund. Little to no negotiation with the outgoing regime was necessary, and the leadership in Kassel could set up regional branches as it had in West Germany. If reunification had not proceeded, it would have slowed the Volksbund’s return, but likely not stopped it altogether.

⁶⁷² Protokoll der Dienstbesprechung der gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge am 24.04.1990 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

⁶⁷³ Protokoll der Dienstbesprechung der gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge am 24.04.1990 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

⁶⁷⁴ Protokoll der Dienstbesprechung der gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge am 24.04.1990 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

The events of the *Wende* had created an atmosphere of greater national fervor to the Volksbund's benefit. It was clear to the Volksbund leadership that the political momentum towards German reunification had been building since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Kohl administration immediately campaigned for reunification and popular sentiment in both East and West Germany expressed the sentiment of being "one people – one Germany." Round Tables and the creation of political parties proposing the continued existence of a reformed East German Republic briefly placed a question mark over the push for reunification. By the end of April 1990, when this meeting of the *Vertrauenspfarrer* was held, the first free elections in the GDR had been held on March 18, with the clear winners being the pro-reunification coalition *Allianz für Deutschland*.⁶⁷⁵ By this point, it was clear that the Volksbund was justified in planning for their expansion into the soon-to-be former East Germany.

Barth described the excitement throughout the Volksbund as a "*Drang in die DDR*" or "urge towards East Germany" among its members to reestablish contacts with partner cities and rebuild the Volksbund in the east, which had been officially absent since 1945. Barth added that the Volksbund will be in contact with the East German Minister of the Interior soon to discuss the implementation of the 1952 and 1965 War Graves laws. Barth concluded his report with the Bible verse from Isaiah 30:15 "In quietness and trust is your strength."⁶⁷⁶ For the religiously inclined within the Volksbund, especially the *Vertrauenspfarrer*, the feeling that their faith had been rewarded by divine intervention was overwhelming.

The surge towards German reunification in early 1990 rekindled the nationalist past for two generations who had promised a socialist utopian future. As this promise crumbled

⁶⁷⁵ Heinrich August Winkler, "The Volkskammer Elections: A Plebiscite for Accession," in *Germany: The Long Road West* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 503-508.

⁶⁷⁶ Protokoll der Dienstbesprechung der gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge am 24.04.1990 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

away, many East Germans both young and old sought to reclaim the German past for a new national future. The *Vertrauenspfarrer* observed that there was “more interest among East Germans for remembering fallen German soldiers, especially among the youth.”⁶⁷⁷ Some recommended leading special youth programs for East Germans, but also for West German youth to work at sites in the East. Pastor Erdmute Labes, now responsible for Halbe after Ernst Teichmann’s death a few years prior, recommended Germany’s largest military cemetery, be transferred directly to the Volksbund’s care and made the focus of youth engagement.⁶⁷⁸

This sudden interest in the restoration of German war graves demonstrated a complete reversal of just a few years prior. The rapid disintegration of communist ideology and the SED combined with the nationalist fervor set forth by rush towards reunification caused a transformation of national memory among East Germans, both young and old. They abandoned the notion of a socialist break with the pre-1945 German past. They were in a sense reclaiming a past that state socialism had attempted to erase. The clearest evidence of this rapid shift in memory is that the Volksbund stabilized its membership number to around 300,000 through both individual and corporative memberships in East Germany.⁶⁷⁹ This stabilization continued well into the late 1990s. Donor levels, which tended to fluctuate between 500,000 to 1 million dependent on major anniversaries, reached 2 million in 1990.⁶⁸⁰ Following the steep decline from 700,000 to 400,000 members between 1970 and 1985, the

⁶⁷⁷ Protokoll der Dienstbesprechung der gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge am 24.04.1990 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

⁶⁷⁸ Protokoll der Dienstbesprechung der gliedkirchlichen Beauftragten für Gräberfürsorge am 24.04.1990 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

⁶⁷⁹ Protokoll über die Zusammenkunft der Vertrauenspfarrer der ehemaligen DDR am 25.04.1991 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

⁶⁸⁰ Protokoll über die Zusammenkunft der Vertrauenspfarrer der ehemaligen DDR am 25.04.1991 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

Volksbund expected to have under 200,000 members and less than half a million donors by 1990.⁶⁸¹

Volksbund President Hans-Otto Weber's meeting with East German state officials took place on July 24, 1990, in Berlin in the office of Church Affairs, which was set to officially dissolve on September 30, 1990. His counterpart was the Secretary of Church Affairs Hermann Kalb. Kalb was a long-time member of the CDU bloc party in East Germany but was only elected after the first free elections in March 1990 to the general assembly. According to President Weber, the aim of the meeting was to establish constant contact with the outgoing GDR government with the aim of shaping the future work of the Volksbund in soon to be Eastern Germany.⁶⁸² President Weber summarized his demands in 3 points:

1. Constant contact with the government of East Germany until its final dissolution and access to all government grave registration files.
2. Coordination with responsible offices to bring Volksbund youth groups from West Germany to cemeteries in the GDR to begin the refurbishment.
- 3 Logistical state support for the dissemination of information on the Volksbund and *Volkstrauertag* through fliers and traveling exhibits.⁶⁸³

State Secretary Kalb agreed to these terms and promised full support in the final months of his office.

The Volksbund's long desired direct access to East Germany came not long after this meeting, and quite easily. A larger meeting of East German officials from the Ministries of the Interior, Church Affairs, Communal Economy, and Health with the Volksbund and the West German Ministry of the Interior occurred on August 22, 1990, in Berlin. The meeting participants also approved the three requests of the

⁶⁸¹ Bernd Ulrich, Christian Fuhrmeister, Manfred Hettling, and Wolfgang Kruse. *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Entwicklungslinien und Probleme* (Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2019), 493.

⁶⁸² "Vermerk über ein Gespräch mit Vertretern des Volksbundes Deutscher Kriegsgräberfürsorge am 24.07.1990 im Amt für Kirchenfragen," Berlin den 02.08.1990," BArch DO 4/1104.

⁶⁸³ "Vermerk über ein Gespräch mit Vertretern des Volksbundes Deutscher Kriegsgräberfürsorge am 24.07.1990 im Amt für Kirchenfragen," Berlin den 02.08.1990," BArch DO 4/1104.

Volksbund President Weber with little debate.⁶⁸⁴ Almost like a verdict, a West German official read aloud the findings of the West German Ministry of the Interior and the Volksbund:

It was found that securing and maintaining war graves in the GDR was neglected. This particularly applies to German war graves. The information in the central war graves index maintained by the Ministry of the Interior should be viewed with reservations, since it corresponds to the status of 1970. It must be assumed that in the meantime war graves have been unlawfully removed without being reburied, such as when opencast mining areas were laid out and other such commercial and other agricultural activities.⁶⁸⁵

Declassified East German files revealed that in some instances, remains had been plowed over, built upon, or excavated and discarded for various economic activities. Apparently, some SED officials even permitted food crops to be planted over former burial grounds without removing the remains.⁶⁸⁶ The West German Interior Ministry commissioned the Dresden Institute for Municipal Economy to create an actual analysis of the war grave registration, distribution, condition and an exact cost analysis for their reconstruction, renewal, as well the recovery and identification of remains where possible. The ministry already estimated a minimum of 5 million DM to bring German war graves in East Germany to standards in West Germany.

With the future security of German war graves achieved, the *Vertrauenspfarrer* began to wonder about their own future in a reunified Germany.⁶⁸⁷ Volksbund President Weber and the *Vertrauenspfarrer* held another meeting on November 1, 1990, to address the questions and the future of their work. Weber announced that the Volksbund would soon assume responsibility for the graves of “victims of war and violent regime,” referring to both the

⁶⁸⁴ “Protokoll über eine Beratung zu Fragen des Bestattungswesens im Zusammenhang mit der Herstellung der Einheit Deutschlands,” BArch DO 4/1108.

⁶⁸⁵ “Protokoll über eine Beratung zu Fragen des Bestattungswesens im Zusammenhang mit der Herstellung der Einheit Deutschlands,” BArch DO 4/1108.

⁶⁸⁶ “Protokoll über eine Beratung zu Fragen des Bestattungswesens im Zusammenhang mit der Herstellung der Einheit Deutschlands,” BArch DO 4/1108.

⁶⁸⁷ Zusammenstellung von Fragen (handwritten), die die Vertrauensleute der ehemaligen DDR gestellt haben (09.11.1990), EZA 110/116.

Nazis and SED-dictatorship, “which the government in the GDR has neglected.”⁶⁸⁸ The *Vertrauenspfarrer* were to play a key role in building the new Volksbund branches of the five new German states in the East and reunified Berlin. The experiences of the *Vertrauenspfarrer* under East German dictatorship were to be crucial in constructing a new commemorative program around totalitarianism.

Nowhere else in Europe had the Volksbund expanded its mandate to include “victims of both war and violent regime.” The graves of fallen German soldiers remained the Volksbund’s primary focus outside Germany. In West Germany since the 1965 war graves law, any victim of the Nazi regime, allied bombing raids, and other consequences of war received state protection. With one exception covered in an earlier chapter, the Volksbund avoided responsibility for caring for the graves of victims of the Nazis because of its status as a private organization that worked for the state in a narrowly, self-defined role. What this new mandate meant in practice was that East Germans killed while escaping over the inter-German border, or those who perished in Stasi custody, such as Matthias Domaschk, a student dissident from Gera, were now commemorated alongside German fallen soldiers of the Second World War. The Volksbund’s efforts to nationalize German war dead – now apparently including the Cold War – had finally reached East Germany on the eve of German Reunification.

Conclusion: Did Reunification save the Volksbund?

In the forty years that the Volksbund operated its clandestine project to secure German war graves in the GDR – an open secret to many SED officials by the mid-1950s – it failed to maintain the long-term, sustainable support from East Germans it had hoped for. There was sustained support from families with invested emotional and ideological

⁶⁸⁸ Vermerk über die Dienstbesprechung des VDKs am 09.11.1990 im Sekretariat des Bundes der Evang. Kirche in Berlin, EZA 110/2.

motivations who were born before or during the war years. But as High Consistory Walter Papst and his predecessors at the War Graves Department had admitted over the years, interest waned with each passing year as the war generation aged. The SED tolerated the war grave project and local officials were willing to work with the *Vertrauenspfarrer* from time to time to maintain the war graves in their districts. But this was a commemorative battle of attrition in the SED's favor. Even a substantial portion of the pastors of the regional protestant churches, some older, but many younger, considered this project a waste of time and effort. Despite the Volksbund's committed financial support of the Lutheran War Graves Department, its remaining years were numbered as long as the SED was in power.

Reunification not only saved the Volksbund's efforts to secure German war graves in East Germany, but temporarily reversed its falling numbers. The Volksbund increased its financial supporters to 1.2 million contributors and the number of full members settled at 300,000, which ended a two-decade long decrease.⁶⁸⁹ Much like in Poland, historical conjuncture – in other words luck – was the decisive breakthrough rather than any meaningful shifts in commemorative approach on the part of the Volksbund. The euphoria of reunification and the boost in their popular support nation-wide gave the leadership the confidence to abandon ongoing negotiations on merging *Volkstrauertag* with other religious holidays at the end of the church calendar. Not since the Adenauer era had the Volksbund leadership become more politically aligned with its national conservative base. It was no longer just surviving Wehrmacht veterans and those who lived through the war who joined or provided financial support for the Volksbund, but younger generations intrigued by a renewed sense of nationalism and interest in Germany's nationalist past. Renewed youth interest also had a resurgence in the West. The Volksbund had failed to bring in the 68er

⁶⁸⁹ Protokoll über die Zusammenkunft der Vertrauenspfarrer der ehemaligen DDR am 25.04.1991 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

generation, but a large segment of East Germans who grew up under socialism now sought to reconnect to a united German past. Even grandchildren of the war generation had a much less confrontational approach to Germany's Nazi past. Many who had been born decades after the war wondered whether they should feel any responsibility for Nazi crimes. Could they be proud to be German again post-reunification? In the long term, the Volksbund retained predominantly individuals who tended to be conservative and nationalist in outlook, and this proved sufficiently sustainable well into the new Millennium. There was no longer an impetus to shift its commemorative program to bring in other voices. Its dedicated base allowed it a potent voice during the most contentious debates around history and memory of the 1990s.

The Volksbund learned from its mistakes of the mid 1980s in directly associating with the far-right. The mid-1980s marked the most rapid loss of members in its history from 500,000 in 1980 to just over 300,000 by 1985.⁶⁹⁰ However, its own definition of "far-right" seemed limited to Neo-Nazi groups and street thugs - not its own veteran partners, both former Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS. Its care of cemeteries across Europe and influence over *Volkstrauertag* celebrations inadvertently created spaces where these right-wing elements cultivated a largely apologetic and heroizing commemorative culture around fallen German soldiers. Even though the Volksbund discouraged associations between its veteran partners and the far-right, the drama in Essel and the activities of Karl Heinz Bitterling, not to mention Alfred Dregger, demonstrated how easy old Nazis could connect with a new generation of Neo-Nazis.

This unintended outcome was a result of the Volksbund's inconsistency and reluctance in seriously engaging its veteran base on the crimes of the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS during the war. In stark contrast to the efforts of Willi Thiele in the 1970s, The

⁶⁹⁰ Bernd Ulrich, Christian Fuhrmeister, Manfred Hettling, and Wolfgang Kruse, *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Entwicklungslinien und Probleme* (Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2019), 493.

Volksbund's publications since the 1980s revealed a consistent pattern of minimizing the extent of Nazi crimes and the Holocaust to 300,000 victims in Germany. The Volksbund depicted the massive civilian losses of Poland, the Soviet Union (in the tens of millions), and the rest of Europe in its publications, notably the periodical *Stimme und Weg*, as a consequence of modern war. The racialized and genocidal context of combat and violence on the Eastern Front, and the role of the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS in these atrocities, were completely absent. At best, this omission allowed conservative veterans to embrace European integration and even accept the loss of Germany's Eastern territories. At worst, it continued the myth of the Wehrmacht's "honorable conduct," obscured the worst of Nazi crimes, and reduced the Holocaust to the persecution of a few hundred thousand individuals in Germany. The Volksbund cultivated a moral framework based on the infallibility of the nation and normalized the Second World War as another conflict like any other – just bigger in its total death count. This framework continued to compete with commemoration of the Holocaust and other victims of the Nazis, which Western mainstream culture embraced by the 1970s. Heading into the 1990s, the Volksbund were in a position to steer this potent sub-culture of nationalism and defeat to its own ends.

Conclusion: Challenges after Reunification

The euphoria of the unprecedented changes that occurred in the eleven months between the Fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, and German Reunification on October 3, 1990, began to fade into sobering reality. While the futures for the pastors and employees of the War Graves department were secured in reunified Germany, most East Germans were not as lucky. One pastor wrote to Helga Haupt at the War Graves Department after New Years 1991 and observed:

There is a difficult path ahead of us, on which we will encounter a lot of new things in the former GDR, especially rising prices in all areas that can hardly or not at all be offset with the lower wages. There are real problems here in the country. I just filled out a form for the taxation of the cemeteries regarding accident insurance. In all the 37 years that was not necessary. You have the feeling as if you were looking in the last corners to get some money out. We also don't know how to increase the [cemetery] fees since almost everyone is unemployed.⁶⁹¹

With the new regional Volksbund branches established and care for the war graves legally guaranteed by the five new states of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Volksbund began to phase out the church's role in this project but kept all personal who wanted to continue.⁶⁹² Helga Haupt received a position from the Federal Archives to help manage the cataloging of the WAsT (Former Wehrmacht Files) located after reunification in East German archives. The War Graves Department office space on Auguststraße in Berlin became a branch office for the Lutheran church of Berlin.⁶⁹³ The new state of Brandenburg decided to continue employing the members of the Cemetery Brigade in the Oder region.⁶⁹⁴ Their local knowledge, years of experience, and technical expertise in grave and memorial design was indispensable. The Volksbund relied on the former *Vertrauenspfarrer* to bring their

⁶⁹¹ Postkarte von Pfarrer Bollmann an OKR Pabst und Frau Haupt den 09.01.1991, EZA 110/116.

⁶⁹² Brief von OKR Pabst an GS Dr. Holz, VDK Kassel den 14.02.1991, betr. GF in der Ex-DDR, EZA 110/2.

⁶⁹³ Brief des VDKs an BEK OKR Pabst den 03.04.1991, betr. Gräberfürsorge in den neuen Bundesländern, EZA 110/116.

⁶⁹⁴ Brief des VDKs an BEK OKR Pabst den 03.04.1991, betr. Gräberfürsorge in den neuen Bundesländern, EZA 110/116.

experience to the new Volksbund branches and advise how the cooperation between the Volksbund, the regional churches, and communities of former East Germany should proceed. Most of the *Vertrauenspfarrer* later joined or led the new Volksbund branches in subsequent years.⁶⁹⁵

On April 25, 1991, the Volksbund held a ceremony and banquet in Berlin to honor the surviving *Vertrauenspfarrer* and staff of the War Graves Department for their years of service. Individuals such as Helga Haupt, Margot Blankenfeldt, and High Consistory Walter Papst received the highest award for non-members of the Volksbund, the “Golden Badge of Honor.” But the event also served to initiate a new chapter of the Volksbund’s activities in the newly united Germany. Volksbund President Hans-Otto Weber emphasized that “a certain line must be drawn after the unification of the Lutheran Churches in East and West and asked for further support of the work of the Volksbund in the future.”⁶⁹⁶ Volksbund membership settled at 300,000, which ended a two-decade long decrease.⁶⁹⁷ Weber also announced the formal integration of the victims of Stalinism, the SED, or killed at the inter-German border in East Germany into their commemorative narrative. As far as the Volksbund was concerned, this inclusion marked the completed transition from a remembrance oriented specifically towards the Second World War to more generally victims of Totalitarianism. President Weber concluded his speech explaining that the Volksbund branch in the Berlin will take over the sponsorship for Halbe on behalf of the State of Brandenburg.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹⁵ Rundschreiben an die Landeskirchen der ehemaligen DDR vom VDK den 16.12.1991, EZA 110/2.

⁶⁹⁶ Protokoll über die Zusammenkunft der Vertrauenspfarrer der ehemaligen DDR am 25.04.1991 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

⁶⁹⁷ Protokoll über die Zusammenkunft der Vertrauenspfarrer der ehemaligen DDR am 25.04.1991 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

⁶⁹⁸ Protokoll über die Zusammenkunft der Vertrauenspfarrer der ehemaligen DDR am 25.04.1991 in Berlin, EZA 110/116.

By Summer 1991, The Volksbund planned to establish five new regional branches in the six new federal states of former East Germany, and in the new united state of Berlin. Weber promised that “due to financial and material insecurity in the east, it may be difficult to rally support for its work, so the Volksbund is offering free membership for former citizens of East Germany until the end of the year.”⁶⁹⁹ The Volksbund planned to employ the *Vertrauenspfarrer* to help establish the Volksbund presence in the East by “recruiting new members and distributing advertising material, recruiting new employees, chairmen of the local and district associations, organizing youth outreaches, and creating sermon aids.”⁷⁰⁰

One widely circulated flyer distributed in former East Germany helped to boost awareness of the Volksbund and its work, but also made some troubling claims.

In most communities in the new federal states there are graves of war and tyranny. To date, no exact figures could be determined; many graves have fallen into oblivion and are neglected. While the graves of fallen Soviet soldiers, anti-fascists and concentration camp victims have been cared for, the condition of most German soldiers' graves, but also of bomb victims and other civilians who died during and after the war, is deplorable.⁷⁰¹

The implication was that the SED had honored outsiders, while the reunified German was to grant East Germans the national commemoration they had been denied. While it is true that the SED placed their commemorative effort on anti-fascist partisans, martyrs and Red Army soldiers, East German officials ignored most other categories of concentration victims.⁷⁰²

Titled simply as “A Leaflet for the Communities,” the Volksbund and the Protestant Churches distributed copies of the flyer widely among communities in former East Germany.⁷⁰³ The flyer presented a sense of continued German victimhood, spreading the

⁶⁹⁹ Vermerk über die Dienstbesprechung des VDKs am 09.11.1990 im Sekretariat des Bundes der Evang. Kirche in Berlin, EZA 110/2.

⁷⁰⁰ Vermerk über die Dienstbesprechung des VDKs am 09.11.1990 im Sekretariat des Bundes der Evang. Kirche in Berlin, EZA 110/2.

⁷⁰¹ Merkblatt für die Kommunen über Aufgaben des Kriegsgräberwesens (Ohne Datum), EZA 110/2.

⁷⁰² Merkblatt für die Kommunen über Aufgaben des Kriegsgräberwesens (Ohne Datum), EZA 110/2.

⁷⁰³ Rundschreiben an die ehemaligen Vertrauenspfarrer in den neuen fünf Bundesländern vom stellv. Vorsitzenden des VDKs Dr. Holz den 30.04.1991, EZA 110/2.

myth that all other peoples killed on Germany territory are remembered except the Germans themselves. The Volksbund distributed this flyer at a time when rising of xenophobic rhetoric and economic turmoil along with changing memory culture encouraged an upsurge in far right and Neo-Nazi activity. It unfortunately fed into the idea of German victimization at the hands of outside forces. The following year saw the xenophobic riots in Rostock, and the firebombing of an asylum center in Solingen. These incidents were motivated in part by the false perception that foreigners were invading Germany and receiving more state benefits than its citizens. These were the first indications of how easily some in East Germany latched onto the idea of German victimization into the 1990s.

The Volksbund's campaign efforts had a clear effect in its favor. Engaging in overtly nationalist rhetoric in the former East was paying off. High Consistory Papst reported in a letter to the Volksbund headquarters in Kassel in November 1991 that despite his efforts to wind down the work and eventually end the War Graves Department in Berlin, he had been receiving more and more correspondence from families and interested supporters in the former GDR. "Even those who fell out of contact years prior renewed their correspondence due to the renewed interest in the care of war graves."⁷⁰⁴ The head of the Volksbund's finance department wrote back and explained that "it is not necessary for Pabst to respond, answer their questions, or fulfill their orders, but only to forward their letters directly to the Volksbund while he completes his main task."⁷⁰⁵ In a final letter exchange between the War Graves Department and the Volksbund in April, 1992, High Consistory Papst announced that his work at Auguststrasse is finished, and "upon request of the General Secretary of the Volksbund, will continue to foster cooperation between the Volksbund and the Lutheran

⁷⁰⁴ Brief von OKR Pabst an den VDK den 04.11.1991, betr. Grabschmuck, EZA 110/2.

⁷⁰⁵ Brief von Herr Fischer der Finanzabteilung des VDKs an OKR Papst den 12.11.1991, betr. Grabschmuckaufträge und Bestellungen, EZA 110/2.

Church in the years to come.”⁷⁰⁶ The General Secretary replied, thanking Papst for his years of service, and stated “the cooperation between the church in the East and the new Volksbund branches is running smoothly thanks to the *Vertrauenspfarrer*.”⁷⁰⁷ By the end of 1991, the Volksbund had effectively replaced the role of the established churches in caring for the war graves in former East Germany.

However, this boost in support did not make the Volksbund impervious to criticism and scandal – just able to withstand it. In 1995, the Federal Government of Germany introduced a “Holocaust Day of Remembrance” to commemorate the victims of National Socialism on the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp. The Volksbund perceived this as a direct affront the “all victims together” it had developed with the federal government through *Volkstrauertag*. The executive committee tried to justify their opposition:

We are of the opinion that one day of national mourning is enough. The mourning embraces all the dead of war and tyranny. Any emphasis on one group also means discrimination against other groups. We have always resisted dividing the war dead into groups. The realization of a Holocaust Memorial Day would rekindle the discussion about victims and perpetrators. The Volksbund cannot be interested in that either.⁷⁰⁸

The Volksbund’s “all victim’s together” approach had placed it firmly in opposition to the growing emphasis on Holocaust remembrance in the German public sphere.

In 1997 The Volksbund took the lead in the fight against the first version of the Wehrmacht Exhibit by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. The exhibit displayed the comprehensive participation of the Wehrmacht in the genocidal programs of National Socialism. The Volksbund saw this as singling out German soldiers for dishonor rather than commemorating them as passive victims of Nazism along with those persecuted by the Nazis.

⁷⁰⁶ Rundschreiben an die Herren Vorsitzenden der Landesverbände des VDKs in den neuen Bundesländern von OKR Pabst den 03.04.1992, EZA 110/2.

⁷⁰⁷ Brief an OKR Pabst von GS des VDKs Dr. Holz den 15.04.1992, EZA 110/2.

⁷⁰⁸ Bernd Ulrich, Christian Fuhrmeister, Manfred Hettling, and Wolfgang Kruse, *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Entwicklungslinien und Probleme*, (Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2019), 350.

"The majority of the German people hated the war," said President Hans-Otto Weber and argued "while many soldiers considered the war immoral, barbaric and cruel, they had to obey orders and fight. The vast majority have maintained decency and humanity."⁷⁰⁹ The Volksbund publicly distanced itself from an exhibition that in its view "criminalizes members of the former Wehrmacht."⁷¹⁰ When the exhibition was finally withdrawn and redesigned, the new President of the Volksbund, Karl-Wilhelm Lange, advocated that political statements should no longer "create the impression that the Volksbund wanted to apologetically take sides and, contrary to the clear research situation, deny the participation of the Wehrmacht, individual units and individual soldiers in the crimes."⁷¹¹ Yet, Lange still made a declaration of honor for the German soldiers, the great majority of whom "fought to the end, trusting in the just and moral actions of their leadership, in faith and with the will to defend their fatherland and his protect territorial integrity. No one is therefore allowed to call the individual soldiers of the German Wehrmacht a 'murderer,' or call the German Wehrmacht collectively a 'gang of murderers.'"⁷¹² The controversy left little doubt where the Volksbund stood in the ongoing debates surrounding the commemoration of the Second World War in Germany.

Reunification in 1990 returned many memorial sites with complicated, multi-layered commemorative possibilities to German national consciousness. Dresden's return to unified Germany, with its infamous firebombing at the hands of the Western allies on February 13, 1945, inspired a renewed focus on notions of German victimhood, best exemplified by Jörg Friedrich's 2002 book *Der Brand* (The Fire). Friedrich's book presented German victimhood as a unique experience of suffering at the end of war removed from the context of Nazi atrocities, or the bombing of European civilian centers at the beginning of the war by the

⁷⁰⁹ Ulrich, *Volksbund*, 350.

⁷¹⁰ Ulrich, *Volksbund*, 350.

⁷¹¹ Ulrich, *Volksbund*, 351.

⁷¹² Ulrich, *Volksbund*, 351.

Luftwaffe. This phenomenon could also be understood as an incorporation of anti-Western, anti-capitalist narratives from former East Germany into the narratives of German nationalism. The destruction of Dresden at the hand of the Western allies featured heavily in East German propaganda.

Since the start of the new millennium, the Volksbund has suffered from loss of membership, but maintains decent financial support through various corporative memberships. Towns, schools, veteran organizations, the *Bundeswehr*, the established churches, and most crucially the federal government continue their yearly financial contributions to the Volksbund due to its committed message of pacifist education in the present, despite problematic messaging concerning the remembrance of the past. Even on this point, the Volksbund has attempted to improve its image by co-publishing a collection of remembrances and accounts on the Jewish victims deported to the death camps from Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic in 2002.⁷¹³ Its continued efforts to identify unknown remains across the former Soviet Union for surviving families and descendants remained a vital service for the solace it brought even sixty years after the conflict.

In 1992, the Volksbund's long desired goal to access all German war graves of the – by this point disintegrating – Soviet Union finally reached its end. Germany and the Russian Federation signed a war graves agreement on December 16, 1992, in which both countries were to guarantee protection and care to each other's war graves from the First and Second World Wars. The government in Bonn of reunified Germany agreed to take care of major Soviet-era memorial sites, such as Treptower Park in Berlin, and the Volksbund commenced its – in theory – unfettered access to German war graves across the territory of the Russian federation. In practice, this proved difficult as it became clear that most graves had simply

⁷¹³ Scheffler, Wolfgang, Diana Schulle, Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Deutsches Riga-Komitee, Stiftung "Neue Synagoge Berlin-Centrum Judaicum," and Gedenkstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz (Berlin Germany). *Buch Der Erinnerung: Die Ins Baltikum Deportierten Deutschen Österreichischen Und Tschechoslowakischen Juden*. München: K.G. Saur, 2003.

become lost after forty years of neglect, and certain sites sensitive to Russian state secrets concerning the GULAG system in the Russian Far East remained off limits well into the new millennium. In addition, despite Moscow's continued support of the Volksbund's project in the post-Soviet years, anxiety among some Russians that the Volksbund were promoting a "cult of German heroism" at these sites across the Russian Federation also persisted well into the 21st century. The city of Smolensk rejected the construction of large German military cemetery of 70,000 graves close to the city limits in the early 2000s due to such concerns. The Volksbund chose the more remote village of Duchovshina for its cemetery.⁷¹⁴

With relatively unfettered accesses German graves across Eastern Europe achieved by 1992, the Volksbund had come the closest to its goal of reshaping not only German, but European memory of the Second World War, best described by its slogan – Reconciliation over the Graves. Recognition of compatible nationalist memories complimented the process of building the European Economic Community, and later the European Union. A common European culture, mutual economic cooperation, and a multi-nationalist approach to memorialization of the Second World War were to be the foundations of a more integrated Europe, while maintaining its distinct nation-states. This conservative commemorative approach required the perseverance of nationalist commemorations and myths as the cost of European integration, so long as they did not disrupt the new liberal-capitalist order. Yet, the weaknesses of this approach were already apparent long before the end of the Cold War.

For one, a commemorative approach of multi-nationalisms did not work well in the inclusion of memories of ethnic minorities lacking a European nation-state of their own. Despite the rising awareness of the Holocaust, the murder and persecution of Roma and Sinti, and widespread collaboration across Nazi occupied Europe, these remained in competition

⁷¹⁴ Nina Janz. "Der Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge als Akteur in der deutschen Kriegsgräberpflege in Russland in den Grenzen der Sowjetunion und als Russische Föderation." *Nordost-Archiv: Zeitschrift für Regionalgeschichte* 32 (2023): 91.

with nationalist commemoration rather than in conversation. West Germany was unique in its “all victims together” approach, which functioned more as a temporary solution to the fracturing of its commemorative culture of the 1960s – most European nation-states simply excluded memories that did not conform to nationalist narratives – but even this would come under renewed pressure in the 1990s as unanswered questions returned to the surface. Yet this was the same era when the opening of Soviet and Eastern European archives revealed new research on the crimes of the Wehrmacht during the war. European states with Volksbund curated cemeteries, East and West, began to criticize the way in which known Nazi criminals, Waffen SS, Wehrmacht soldiers, and victims of the Nazis were being equally commemorated on their territory.

Another weakness of the Volksbund’s commemorative approach is its inability to reconcile race. This becomes even more apparent in the 21st century as Europe diversifies racially with the arrival of peoples from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. During the Second World War, the Nazis and their collaborators conflated ethnicity for race, perceiving Slavs, Germans, and Jews as racially different despite shared whiteness. One of the real achievements of post-war European integration was relabeling these groups as European ethnicities, rather than learning to reconcile perceived racial differences in a diverse community. Even one of the strongest inter-war proponents of European integration, Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, whose thoughts on Pan-Europeanism were considered liberal and progressive in his own time, would likely agree with the consensus among European conservatives in the 1990s and early 2000s that multiculturalism had failed. Coudenhove-Kalergi, having a mixed racial ancestry himself – Bohemian nobility and Japanese – believed in a common European culture to unite the continent’s ethnicities and traditional minorities. Non-white arrivals from different cultures would have to assimilate culturally, and in essence remain demographic minorities.

The Volksbund's commemorative approach appealed best to a less culturally, racially, and politically diverse Germany and larger European community. Integrating the memory of Europe's traditional minorities was, and continues to be a weak point, albeit with some small signs of progress. In March 2012, the Volksbund co-sponsored a seminar with the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung titled "*Zur Konkurrenz der Erinnerungskulturen in Deutschland, Frankreich und Polen*" (The Competition of Cultures of Remembrance in Germany, France, and Poland), and invited both scholars and representatives of several minority groups from the respective countries to attend. The purpose of the seminar was to deconstruct ways in which these respective national, commemorative cultures have hierarchized victim groups of the Second World War according to national myths and memorialization. The Volksbund's speaker, Thomas Rey reflected on the Volksbund's complicated history in this regard.⁷¹⁵

Tensions also continued to exist between national commemorative cultures as the Volksbund still insist on including all fallen German soldiers, even SS officers with known histories of atrocity, into their "all victims together" approach on cemeteries across Europe. The German cemetery in Costermano, Italy came into controversy in the 1990s when Italians realized that SS and Wehrmacht soldiers who had committed numerous atrocities against Italians and elsewhere in Europe, were still recorded in the cemeteries *Ehrenbücher* or Books of Honor. In Russia, as search efforts for fallen Germans around Volgograd, St. Petersburg, and Kursk continue, some Russian civilians and officials still expressed displeasure at the Volksbund honoring who they perceive as invaders and murders in cemeteries on their territory in early 2000s. The closing of memorial and investigative sites in Putin's Russia paralleled this phenomenon. This tension only increased Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, whom Germany supported through military and financial aid. The Volksbund

⁷¹⁵ Tagungsbericht über das gemeinsame Seminar der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung und des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge "Zur Konkurrenz der Erinnerungskulturen in Deutschland, Frankreich und Polen," Volksbund deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel: March 2012.

has done even less to address how to broaden their appeal to a changing racial and cultural demographic in Germany, let alone a larger European community. This last point, however, applies not only to the Volksbund, but to a larger exploration of the history of memory in postwar Europe.

For an organization dedicated to nationalist commemoration, the Volksbund managed to influence European commemorative culture well beyond the scope of its founding. In the first years of the Volksbund's existence during the Weimar years, its members recoiled in the thought of remembering German defeat in the First World War. After 1945 remembering the Second World War through the lens of defeat became the best alternative. The Volksbund created a culture of defeat through which it presented Germans broadly as unfortunate, passive victims of militarism – much preferable to accepting the label of active perpetrators. From the perspective of the Volksbund, remembering passive victims punished in defeat promotes pacifism and avoids militarism and authoritarianism through active participation in the present. This lens helped it rebuild and turn itself into a competent partner of the West German state. From Adenauer's *Westbindung* to Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik*, and the "Common European Home" of Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl, the Volksbund played a role in Germany's cultural integration into European, but also influenced European commemorative culture as whole. The wide geographic spread of 5.3 million German war graves across Europe made the Volksbund the most interconnected graves commission of Europe by the end of the Cold War. Yet, the Volksbund's continued existence in the new millennium remains in question.

The Volksbund did itself a disservice continuing to link the preservation and commemoration of fallen Wehrmacht soldiers to nationalist narratives after reunification. The Volksbund strove to distance itself from the far right and attract center-right and center-left Germans who generally had a more critical view of the past than previous generations and

abstained from more radical memory politics. German Reunification and the change to German memory culture it produced provided only a temporary solution to the Volksbund's dilemma. It mobilized mostly East Germans to finally grieve and remember the Second World War with West Germans. After the excitement faded, and Holocaust remembrance occupied public attention by the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World, the Volksbund found itself in the same dilemma as prior to reunification. After the controversies of the 1990s, membership numbers started to decline again, but this time compounded by the war time generation beginning to die out. Its survival since the new millennium has since depended on whether it can adapt to the commemorative interests of Germans with no direct connection to the Second World War.

The Volksbund succeeded in this regard, albeit not in the way its leadership likely intended. The Volksbund retained predominantly individuals who tended to be conservative and nationalist in outlook, and this proved sufficiently sustainable well into the new Millennium. There was no longer an impetus to shift its commemorative program to bring in other voices. In 2019, as it celebrated its one hundredth anniversary, it still had 100,000 members. The Volksbund officially distanced itself from right-wing populist groups such as the AfD and Pegida that regularly engage in apologetics for Nazi war crimes, Holocaust denial, and xenophobia. Given the Volksbund's tumultuous history since 1919, and faced with declining membership, whether this distance will continue remains uncertain.

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