

Take a lesson: How Germany handles monuments from Nazi and communist eras

The overdue momentum to remove various Confederate symbols, especially about 1,500 statues, from their perches has picked up across the country in the aftermath of right-wing violence in Charlottesville, Va. In Gainesville, Fla., Durham, N.C., and Baltimore, the toppling has already begun. In some cases, state or local authorities have driven the process. In others, activists have seized the initiative to speed things up.

Yet despite the growing consensus that the “dangerous totems” (as Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings has dubbed them) must go, there is no agreement about the monuments’ fates. Ideas range from traceless destruction to warehouse storage to museum display. Some propose, to quieter applause, to keep the objects in place, accompanied by appropriate labeling.

In the cacophony of opinions, few observers and participants seem bothered by the lack of a coherent, thought-out strategy for disposing of the Confederacy’s visible traces while preserving evidence of this vitally important chapter of our past.

They should be. Not out of concern for the preposterous right-wing lament about the erasure of history, but because the task at hand is to purge the imagery in a way that guards against amnesia, while also transforming the statues from celebratory monuments to objective evidence.

The United States is not alone in confronting this dilemma. Countries across the globe routinely grapple with how to handle reminders of unsavory chapters in their history. Recently, the issue has made headlines from Ukraine to Taiwan.

But nowhere have the questions about the physical markers of unwanted pasts — first Nazi, then Communist and, lately, colonial — played out as long as they have in Germany. Over the last 70 years, the country has accepted a simple truth: Out of sight hardly means out of mind. The removal of the relics of a hateful social order is not in itself cause for celebration. It is the aftermath that matters.

The German case is exemplary not because Germans attained closure, but because they came to recognize that closure was neither tenable nor desirable. Instead, the processing of history is like an open wound that slowly heals only with careful debate about the often-explosive issues at stake. The United States can avoid making irreparable mistakes by learning from Germany's blunders and subsequent course corrections.

Over time, Germans have moved through three distinct phases to tackle the country's fascist legacy: erasing it, ignoring it, and consigning it to the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* — German for “the enduring confrontation with the past.” The experience offers seven lessons for the fight over America's Confederate past.

There is no zero hour. After the war in occupied Germany, restraint and caution were not initially on the agenda. For nearly a decade, West German authorities followed the path of least resistance by simply eliminating the traces of Hitler's rule.

For better or worse, wartime Allied bombing and firestorms had given them a considerable head start. In some cases, the wartime damage did 90 percent of the job. And yet this near-total destruction did little to prevent the neo-Nazis and revisionists from reorganizing. The 1952 court ban on the Nazi Party's successor, the Socialist Reich Party, sent a much stronger message.

Compromises look weak but have benefits. Soon enough, it became obvious that wiping out every structure with a whiff of Nazism was unrealistic. The traces of the Third Reich included entire city blocks constructed in the regime's signature bombastic, boxy style. Blowing up structurally sound buildings or the highways Hitler expanded into a Reichsautobahn network would have further hurt a nation whose infrastructure lay in ruins.

East Germany, all the more parsimonious after bearing the brunt of Soviet reparations, was the first to realize that pragmatic compromise was essential. Of course, the Third Reich's insignia had to come down and mostly did, but the structures themselves were retained for new functions and uses. Though driven by necessity, this pragmatic solution now gets credit for preserving for posterity the pathetic bleakness and soullessness of Hitler's architectural vision. It has not aged well, turning from shades of white to brown as decades have gone by.

Bad history can be put to good use. Walking around cities like Berlin, Munich, and Nuremberg today, a tourist will not often find an obvious Nazi landmark. Yet many inconspicuous remnants remain, ranging from unremarkable city squares and department store amphitheatres to more famous one-offs, among them a retired airport, an Olympic stadium, Nazi party rally grounds, and a former resort.

While the government (and, increasingly, private initiatives) pours money into conserving these places, city tour companies train their guides to peel back all of the layers of the morally complicated history for visitors. Many prominent buildings that are still in use have information boards — not tiny plaques — in front, with meticulously researched historical explanations.

Especially fraught places, where the Nazi project was most present, like the Haus der Kunst in Munich — the inaugural venue for the Nazi art exhibit organized to compete with the more popular modernist “Degenerate Art” show across the street — now commit a lion’s share of their resources to displaying the art they would have shunned during the Nazi reign. In the hallways, historical timelines lay out the turbulent past.

Empty spaces can talk, but not all should. In Berlin, the Topography of Terror museum fills the space that once held the sprawling lair of Hitler’s bureaucracy. It has transformed an otherwise empty lot into a meaningful, and sobering, reminder of the horrors of the Nazi regime.

And yet some sites, Germans have decided, must remain unmarked and obscured for good reason: to prevent them from becoming shrines to the Nazi past. The Berlin bunker where Hitler killed himself, which was blown up in 1947, remains buried under a parking lot, with no signage.

Erasure comes with no guarantees. Austria has a similar vision for Hitler’s birth house. In June, after protracted debates, its Constitutional Court finally authorized government seizure of the structure from its private owners. To this point, the building remains under protection as a historical monument.

As in Berlin, Austrian authorities hope to prevent the house from becoming a difficult-to-control and illicit neo-Nazi pilgrimage site. But even a razed landmark is still a spot on the map, and many concede that it, too, could become a beacon for hate groups.

Preserving difficult pasts calls for civic negotiation. In the 1990s, German officials applied the lessons learned from dealing with Nazi iconography to the markings left over from the Communist era. Berlin's Senate impaneled a special commission of experts from the city's East and West. It concluded that celebrations of the Communist past had no place in the reunified capital-to-be, but that the distinctive history should be accessible in both parts of the city.

Other corners of former East Germany have also striven to preserve this history by allowing many statues of Communist heroes to remain standing. In some small towns, such as Königswusterhausen outside Berlin, streets named after Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels run parallel to each other.

Razing and replacing uncovers more than it hides. Where attempts to dismantle Communist symbols had prevailed, as in the case of the East German Palace of the Republic, which was destroyed to rebuild the shell of the Kaiser's Berlin Palace, new issues emerged. The demolition and reconstruction have exposed additional unprocessed chapters of Germany's past, especially its history of colonialism. Achieving a clean slate, free of historical stains, proved to be a delusion.

These lessons from Germany should serve as a cautionary tale for Americans rushing to destroy every Confederate monument within reach. Rather than rashly overcompensating for decades of inaction by haphazardly tearing down or hiding Confederate monuments, Americans should have the painful debates necessary to decide the fate of these relics of a bygone era. If German history is any indication, simply turning the page isn't an option.

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