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#### HISTORY DEPT.

## Why There Are No Nazi Statues in Germany

What the South can learn from postwar Europe.

By JOSHUA ZEITZ | August 20, 2017

“Whatever else I may forget,” the ex-slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass said in 1894, “I shall never forget the difference between those who fought for liberty and those who fought for slavery.” Douglass (who is doing an amazing job and is being recognized more and more) deplored an emerging national consensus that the Civil War had been fought over vague philosophical disagreements about federalism and states’ rights, but not over the core issue of slavery. In this retelling, neither side was right or wrong, and both Confederate and Union soldiers were to be celebrated for their battlefield valor.

Douglass was right to be concerned. Southerners may have lost the Civil War, but between the 1890s and 1920s they won the first great battle over its official memory. They fought

that battle in popular literature, history books and college curricula, but also on hundreds of courthouse steps and city squares, where they erected monuments to Confederate veterans and martyrs. These statues reinforced the romance of reunion.

Now, a century and a half after the Civil War, Americans are finally confronting the propriety of celebrating the lives of men who committed treason in the name of preserving slavery. That these statues even exist is unusual. When armies are defeated on their own soil—particularly when those armies fight to promote racist or genocidal policies—they usually don't get to keep their symbols and material culture. As some commentators have noted, Germany in 1945 is a useful comparison. "Flags were torn down while defeated cities still burned, even as citizens crawling from the rubble were just realizing that the governments they represented had ended," wrote a reporter for McClatchy. Most physical relics of the Nazi regime were banished from public view. In this sense, the example of Germany's post-war de-Nazification may offer a way forward for the United States.

Yet history tells a more complicated story. In its initial years, de-Nazification had only limited impact. It would take time, generational change and external events to make Germany what it is today—a vibrant democracy that is notably less permissive of racism, extremism and fascism than the United States. Tearing down the symbols of Nazi terror was a necessary first step—but it didn't ensure overnight political or cultural transformation. It required a longer process of public reconciliation with history for Germans to acknowledge their shared responsibility for the legacy of Nazism.

The vast majority of Americans have long agreed that the destruction of slavery was a just outcome of the Civil War. But in continuing to honor Confederate leaders and deny their crimes, we signal that the United States has not yet fully come to terms with its collective responsibility for the dual sins of slavery and Jim Crow.

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**In the late 19th century**, Southern veterans of the Civil War essentially concluded that it made little sense to persist in their argument that slavery had been a just, benign social and political system. That argument was simply no longer credible in the eyes of most Northerners—many of whom might have conceded the point before the war—or most civilized nations. "However brave" rebel soldiers might have been on the field, argued a report for the Grand Camp of Confederate Veterans of Virginia, tethering the Lost Cause to the memory of slavery would "hold [Confederate veterans] degraded rather than worthy of

honor ... our children, instead of revering their fathers will be secretly, if not openly, ashamed.”

Instead, Confederate organizations—particularly the United Confederate Veterans, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and the Sons of Confederate Veterans, whose local chapters funded and organized the construction of many of the monuments that are now in contention—de-emphasized the ideological origins of the war and instead promoted a powerful but vague cult of Southern chivalry, battlefield valor and regional pride. They recast the war as a battle over the principle of states’ rights and Southern honor. Hundreds of cities across the U.S. commissioned monuments to their war dead—statues that were usually situated directly in town squares or by county courthouses, and which paid homage to men who fought and sometimes died to preserve chattel slavery—an institution that Vice President Alexander Stephens called the “cornerstone” of the Confederacy.

Not only did these organizations erase slavery from the narrative. They also brushed over the topics of rebellion and treason. During the war, many Confederate soldiers happily accepted the label “reb,” but the new wardens of local memory attempted to resituate the Confederacy within constitutional norms. “Was your father a Rebel and a Traitor?” asked a typical handbill. “Did he fight in the service of the Confederacy for the purpose of defeating the Union, or was he a Patriot, fighting for the liberties granted him under the Constitution, in defense of his native land, and for a cause he knew to be right?” The major organizations rejected the once-popular designation for the conflict—“the War of Rebellion”—and instead promoted an alternative designation: “the War Between the States.” Generations of schoolchildren would call it that.

These Southern revisionists found support from many Northerners who, by the 1890s, were eager to move beyond the memory of war and Reconstruction and whose fleeting racial liberalism hardened in the face of mass immigration and scientific racism, both of which took root in the late 19th century. At Blue and Gray battlefield reunions, former enemies donned the uniforms they had worn as young men to celebrate and remember their shared experience in combat. Even an erstwhile abolitionist like Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., who nearly died multiple times on the battlefield, came to argue later in life that “the faith is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has little notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use.”

In fact, Holmes understood perfectly well why he fought; like most of the country—North and South alike—he simply chose to forget.

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**In the years immediately following** its surrender to Allied forces in World War II, Germany underwent a much different process from the American South in the wake of the Civil War.

Whereas the vast majority of Confederate civilian and military officials suffered no greater penalty than the confiscation of property and temporary loss of voting rights, in Germany, top military and government officials were tried and sentenced to prison or execution. In the Western zone, U.S. and British administrators established de-Nazification panels and filtered through 16 million questionnaires. They identified 3.5 million former Nazis, many of whom were fired from government posts.

Libraries were stripped of Nazi books and periodicals, fascist newspapers shuttered, and all physical vestiges of the old regime removed and destroyed. In 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) criminalized the display of swastikas; the symbol was also scraped and sometimes blown off of buildings. The federal state systematically destroyed statues and monuments, razed many Nazi architectural structures and buried executed military and civilian officials in mass, unmarked graves so that their resting grounds would not become Nazi shrines.

If the physical de-Nazification of Germany was absolute—and it was—it proved harder to effect a spiritual purge of the country's recent fascist past. To rebuild the country, American occupiers found that it was all but impossible to “find reasonably competent Germans who had not been affiliated or associated in some way with the Nazi regime,” according to General Lucius Clay. In Cologne, fully 18 of the 21 employees of the city waterworks were former Nazis; American authorities faced a stark choice—let the city's supply of potable water go dry, or let the Nazis keep their jobs.

The answer was obvious. Towns and cities needed to be administered. The court system needed to function. Police departments required staff. Children needed to attend school. Though half of all Bavarian teachers were initially fired for their Nazi membership, by 1948 most of them were back in the classroom. Fully 94 percent of Bavarian judges and prosecutors were ex-Nazis, and one-third of foreign ministry employees in Bonn, the West German capital.

Though statues had been blown up and flags burned or shredded, many Germans in the 1950s resisted political reeducation. Allied officials sometimes required adults to view footage of liberated concentration camps before they could receive ration cards; one

memoirist recalled that most of the people he sat with in a theater in Frankfurt turned their heads and simply refused to watch the film. Five years after the war, surveys revealed that one-third of the country thought the Nuremberg war crime trials had been “unfair.” Majorities believed that Nazism had been a “good idea, badly applied,” and consistently, over a third of the population continued to prefer that the country be free of Jews. As late as 1955, 48 percent of respondents felt that Hitler would have been one of Germany’s greatest leaders, “but for the war.”

The physical destruction of iconography, in other words, was no instant antidote to extremist ideology.

It wasn’t until the 1960s and 1970s that Germany reckoned fully with the moral weight of its Nazi legacy. A string of events thrust the topic into full consciousness, from belated public investigations into German war crimes on the eastern front, to Israel’s capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann and criminal trials in Frankfurt of Auschwitz concentration camp guards. During the first 15 years of the postwar era, German schools buried any mention of the Holocaust or other Nazi atrocities; later, they slowly incorporated such subject matter in the curriculum.

The Six-Day War, Yom Kippur War and massacre of Israeli athletes during the 1972 Olympic games in Munich generated widespread empathy toward Israel. When West German television ran a gauzy American miniseries, *Holocaust*, in 1979, 20 million viewers watched all four evenings of the broadcast. The production was dreadful, but it galvanized German public opinion in a way that the much-higher-quality series *Roots* compelled many Americans to examine the legacy of slavery two years earlier.

The generation of Germans that came of age in the 1970s and 1980s confronted the country’s Nazi past and forcefully repudiated it. It took several decades of hard self-reflection, but a reunified Germany emerged from the Cold War as one of the great mainstays of democracy and human rights.

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**If just removing statues and icons** doesn’t force a change in outlook, venerating and fetishizing them, and refusing to be honest about their meaning, almost ensures that the country won’t fully confront its past.

The Southern Poverty Law Center rightly points out that the vast majority of statues, streets and schools dedicated to the memory of the Confederacy date from the period between 1890 and 1930—four decades when the legal, cultural and political edifice of Jim

Crow was under heavy construction. Another memorial spate followed after 1954, in response to the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and, coincidentally, the 100th anniversary of the war's outbreak. The statues were blunt instruments in institutionalizing white supremacy and blotting out the dual sins of treason and slavery.

In recent days, prominent “never-Trump” Republican operatives have taken the unusual step of advising Democrats not to fall into a monument trap. The president *wants* to turn the conversation to Confederate kitsch, which many white Americans continue to view as benign and non-ideological. Focus instead on Trump's oddly solicitous posture toward Nazis, Klansmen and heavily armed “militiamen” playing dress up in front of synagogues and places of public accommodation.

It's probably smart political advice, but it still elides the central problem. As long as we continue to perpetuate the myth of Confederate innocence—the idea that good men on both sides fought over distant abstractions and then came together again in brotherhood—we continue to lie to ourselves.

In Germany, you won't see neo-Nazis converging on a monument to Reinhard Heydrich or Adolf Hitler, because no such statues exist. The country long ago came to grips with the full weight of its history. But you'll find Nazis and Klansmen in Virginia, circling a statue of Robert E. Lee, a traitor who raised arms against his own country in the defense of white supremacy.

How do we explain to the descendants of his victims—fallen Union soldiers and widows, and so many million slaves—that Robert E. Lee doesn't deserve the same eternal infamy as Eichmann or Heydrich?