

There Are No German Memorials to Honor Nazis

Americans could learn from how dramatically German society has moved away from the low point of its history.

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By Susan Neiman (Author of *Learning from the Germans*)

I am an American Jew from the South. I have lived in Berlin, Germany for many years. Friends of mine have asked me why Americans argue over Confederate statues and other monuments to America's past with slavery and segregation.

They ask me if Americans would be able to do what German people did. In Germany, there aren't monuments to celebrate the Nazis. Even though, many grandfathers fought as one or died as one. Germany does have tons of memorials to honor those who died in the Holocaust at the hands of the Nazis.

Germans are very clear to ask for national forgiveness for the nation's crimes during World War Two. That is very different to the United States. Our country does not seem willing to admit to the national crime of slavery and segregation.

There have been long debates over the removal of Confederate flags and monuments across the United States. You'll probably be surprised to learn that descendants of the German Army once made exactly the same claims as the descendants of the Confederate army. Comments about German soldiers being innocent of the Holocaust were made in public from the end of the war in 1945 through the 1990s.

What changed that? From 1995 to 1999, a photographic museum display traveled through Germany. It showed photographs of war crimes committed by average German soldiers. For most Americans, the word Nazi means one moment in time called the Holocaust. That's when Jewish people were rounded up, put on cattle cars, transported to death camps where they were murdered by poison gas.

If we only focus on that moment, we lose the opportunity to learn more. We should ask how did Germany get to the point where those crimes were okay. Then we should ask how did regular German people accept what happened. How did they come to feel bad for the violent, racist history? That process is one other countries, like the United States, can learn from.

I began my life as a white girl in the South in the middle of the civil-rights movement. I have spent much of the past 30 years watching Germany come to terms with its history. If the 2017 white-supremacist demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia made anything clear, it's that Nazi's are not only a German problem, they are an American problem.

Modern day Nazis' were in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 to support the Confederate cause. They made this clear: Anyone who fights for Confederate symbols, is fighting for Nazi values. We build memorials to remember some parts of history and ignore others. Memorials are symbols of the ideas we choose to lift up, in the hopes of reminding ourselves and our children that those ideas have been held by brave men and women.

Germany has no monuments that celebrate the German Army of World War 2. By choosing to remember what its soldiers once did, it has made a choice about the values it wants to reject. Other choices, like adding glass walls to government buildings, including the German Capital building, reflect the value that Democracy should be transparent (open to the people).

When the Berlin Wall came down, it opened up valuable land in the heart of the city. Instead of selling it to one of the many bidders, Germany's Parliament dedicated 4.5 acres to what became the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, along with many smaller monuments scattered throughout the city.

Germans didn't do this to forget the roots of racism. It was done to remind Germans of the good ideas they all agree to, and set aside the bad ones. This is a decision that Americans are now struggling with.

The struggle itself is good news. We have learned that when you don't examine the past, it continues to be a problem. It continues to cause pain. Like most white Americans, I was taught a history that was comfortable and triumphant. I knew there were times when the country failed to live up to the ideals on which it was founded. I was told those failures went away and the story got better over time.

Slavery was a crime, but we fought a war to outlaw it. Segregation wasn't fair, but the civil-rights movement had overcome it. Barack Obama's presidency seemed the natural ending to this hopeful story. Few people believed that the election of an African American president could end racism. More recent events have forced white Americans to publicly examine their country's history as never before.

Just a few years ago, people learned that the monuments honoring Confederate soldiers were not innocent tributes to recently fallen ancestors, but a deliberate attempt of organizations like the Daughters of the Confederacy to promote a false account of the Civil War that went along with white-supremacist ideas.

Even the name "Jim Crow era" was tricky. Without much knowledge of the ways in which slavery turned into Black Codes, convict leasing, and racist terror, white Americans could continue to avoid admitting how much racism was a central part of our national story. Now this information is harder to avoid. It turns up in PBS specials and in plantation tours that no longer describe the expensive furniture, but the lives of those enslaved people who made such wealth possible.

What will probably happen is that this history will affect the way future generations come to understand their history. There are some who attack this focus as an extreme. That happened in Germany too. When most Germans could be honest about the crimes of the past, they could be forgiven. That's better than ignoring it and hoping it goes away. By doing that, Germany became a strong power in Europe and the world.

The racism of Germany's past and America's are not the same. What worked in one place can't just be transferred to another. What's important is the things they have in common that can teach us about guilt and forgiveness, memory and continued discussions, and how our history helps us prepare for the future.

How much time and trouble will it take Americans who grew up to believe in their exceptional goodness come to light with the nation's crimes of the past.

The German experience after World War 2 has been a slow and difficult process. Its successes and failures are similar to the careful steps America is taking toward justice, forgiveness and coming together. It is too soon to tell how successful those steps will be, but the recent struggles over American history give us some reason to hope.

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SPECIAL NOTE: This is a modified version of this article. The original version can be found [here](#)