WHOM TO MOURN AND HOW?
THE PROTESTANT CHURCH AND THE RECASTING OF MEMORY IN GERMANY, 1945-1962

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ABSTRACT

James Franklin Willamson: WHOM TO MOURN AND HOW?
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(Under the direction of Konrad H. Jarausch)

This paper examines the German Protestant Church’s influence upon West Germans’ memory of the Second World War. Beginning in 1945 and continuing into the 1960s, senior church officials and local pastors shaped the ways people in the western occupation zones and subsequently the Federal Republic could talk about the war and the many military and civilian dead. In contesting when and how to observe an annual commemoration of the dead in the new Germany, Church leaders advocated discontinuing practices from the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. Simultaneously, pastors recast death to alter the way Germans perceived soldiers’ deaths for the nation and civilian casualties of war. Together these interventions contributed to a larger transformation of German society in the wake of aggression, war crimes and genocide.
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### ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>EKD</td>
<td>Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland</td>
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<tr>
<td>EZA</td>
<td>Evangelisches Zentralarchiv, Berlin</td>
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<tr>
<td>FRG</td>
<td>Federal Republic of Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDR</td>
<td>German Democratic Republic</td>
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<tr>
<td>VDK</td>
<td>Volksbund Deutscher Kriegsgräberfürsorge</td>
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: BROKEN NATION, TAINTED TRADITIONS

The Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche provides an example of the remarkable transformation of Germany after 1945. The old bomb-scarred brick tower stands next to the new pillar of glass and metal, symbolizing Germans’ rebuilt society, rhetorically and physically. As Germans chose not to completely discard the old church building, Germans also did not completely erase past practices of memory and commemoration that existed before the Second World War. The circumstances of May 1945 forced Germans to alter some practices and replace others, but the new ways of remembering the war and mourning the dead still contained some remnants of older, pre-1945 forms.

Germany in May 1945 was an abruptly changed society: a nation of veterans, prisoners, victims, and a population who felt fortunate just having survived. Although Prussian history gave Germans access to a tradition of military excellence and victory, this narrative now was now broken by two lost wars. For Germans trying to make sense of their new post-War environment, restrictions on monuments’ erection and even the display of uniforms left them little public room for settling upon the war’s meaning and deciding how the story should be narrated to future generations. Given these limitations, how were Germans to reconcile the deaths of so many husbands-, fathers-, and sons-at-arms?
The war’s closing months and the ensuing occupation were chaotic and Germans’ memories were similarly disordered.\(^1\) Recollecting the war’s history was a process contested by contemporary generations and their children. While the Federal Republic searched for a “useable” history of its short existence, individuals sought ways to relate the story of the Second World War that reconciled their own experiences and those of their loved ones with the public knowledge of crimes against civilians and a war of annihilation.\(^2\)

To understand the interaction between memories formed by individuals and those touted by their leaders, Konrad Jarausch suggests three levels of memory formation. The first level represents the individual’s memory, which for many Germans in 1945

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\(^{2}\) See Robert G. Moeller, "War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany," *The American Historical Review* 101, No. 4 (1996): 1008-1048; for an account of the roots of the “Eastern” and “Western” memory of the war, see Jeffery Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1997). Both Moeller and Herf are excellent points of departure, but both leave the reader only with a sense of how the elites and organized victims, survivors and veterans publicly remembered the war. We are left without a strong account for how Germans may have re-told the war at lower, more intimate levels, such as the village or family level. For an account of organized veterans’ activities, see James Diehl, *The Thanks of the Fatherland: German Veterans after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). For the Federal Republic’s creation of a new, “West” German tradition, see Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung 1948-1990* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999). For the question of recounting the war in a peculiarly intimate fashion, as one’s own family history, see Aleida Assmann, *Generationsidentitäten und Vorurteilsstrukturen in der neuen deutschen Erinnerungsliteratur* (Vienna: Picus Verlag, 2005).
consisted of individual life histories rendered as “survival stories.” The second level of memory is the “collective remembrance” level, where individual memories are fixed together into “a figurative pattern.” Individual lives’ storylines are selectively “stylized” to fit into larger group experiences which allows a collective memory to coalesce. The third level of memory formation is the public memory, or a “memory culture that defines how a country deals with its own past.” This memory is situated in the public sphere, open to invocation and appropriation by the media, historians, public figures and politicians.

Beyond considering the relationship of individual memory to collective, any investigation of Germans’ memories of the Second World War must also take into account the anxieties brought by the Cold War. Not only did the Federal Republic create a new military force shortly after the Wehrmacht’s defeat and surrender, but the US and USSR stood poised to fight the next world war in the very theater where they left off. While most German men were definitely against taking part in their nation’s new military, this rejection of military tradition was not universal. If Germans’ reactions to the Cold War and rearmament were uneven, perhaps this is due to uneven efforts to critically examine and react to the war.

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4 Ibid., 325-6.

5 Ibid., 331-2.

6 David Clay Large contends that rearmament represented the “primary question in West German domestic politics of the early 1950s.” David Clay Large, Germans to the Front: West German Rearmament in the Adenauer Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 2

7 Alaric Searle’s research on the public image and public roles of former high-level Wehrmacht generals and admirals suggests a fluctuating public opinion of these men, and of the newly emerging West German military, throughout the era from 1949 to 1955. See Alaric Searle, Wehrmacht Generals, West German Society, and the Debate on Rearmament, 1949-1959 (West Port, CT: Praeger, 2003).
How did Germans come to grips with their own national and family histories? The politics and discourses shaping and rearranging the “official” German memories of the war have been traced by scholars studying public policies, the German press, and public statements by politicians during this era of recovery and rebuilding. The Occupation Authorities aimed to rid Germany of the visible elements of Nazism and its public support. The new Federal Republic’s own policies during the 1950s to compartmentalize the Nazi past addressed the presence or absence of Nazi-tainted elements and individuals, as seen by everyday Germans. These official measures to manage memories were mostly directed at the public, sanctioned, memory of the war. What elements shaped memory at the lower levels?

For many Germans during this time, mourning practices and memorial observances were constructing memories at the collective level, whether in a church or in a town square. The leadership of the Protestant Church in Germany began organizing Germans to mourn in 1945, attempting to direct what Germans could publicly say about the war and the deaths of soldiers and civilians. Aside from institutional directives, local pastors led their congregations to think about death and the dead in specific ways. Because Germans encountered the Church in their local communities, studying its actions allows us to look past memories settled upon at the national level, yielding a more complex understanding of how Germans thought about the Second World War. Taken together, the Protestant Church’s efforts to guide Germans’ memories presented a radical reordering of memorial practices, which allowed and encouraged the memory of some while discouraging or even disallowing the memory of others.

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CHAPTER 2
WHEN TO MOURN

Contending Parties

Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (The German Protestant Church)

The German Protestant Church was uncertain of how to minister to grieving Germans after the fighting stopped. While the Protestant Church had led Germans’ mourning and remembering after the First World War, in 1945 the Church’s relationship to the German state and the German people was altered with the collapse of the Third Reich. As their congregations mourned the deaths of individual soldiers and civilians, the church did not want to mourn the death of the Nazi era.

In the wake of the First World War, the Protestant Church had been party to the springtime memorial observances that honored and remembered the fallen soldiers. Between 1925 and 1930, the Protestant Church did not participate in the civic Volkstrauertag (Memorial Day) on the springtime Sunday Reminiscere but instead memorialized all who died in the First World War on the religious Totensonntag (Sunday of the Dead) in November. While the Church was concerned to keep the two observances separate, after 1930 it worked with the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge (see below) to support a patriotic and nationalist Volkstauertag, uniting the German people around celebration of their dead soldiery. Amidst the turmoil
of the Weimar years, Volkstrauertag and Totensonntag both lent themselves as vehicles to honor and swear allegiance to the (former) Kaiser and Reich.9

After 1933 the Volkstrauertag was supported by the Nazis to establish their dedication to the memory of fallen soldiers. The Protestant leaders wanted to keep springtime Volkstrauertag celebrations separate from their own more solemn Totensonntag in November where the dead of the congregation were mourned. In 1934 the Nazis renamed the spring memorial observance to Heldengedenktag (Heroes’ Memorial Day) and fixed its date on Sunday Reminiscere with the church leaders’ blessing. Simultaneously the Nazis reserved Heldengedenktag for themselves, the Volksbund and the military to organize, leaving only minimal role for the church. When the Nazis further fixed Heldengedenktag on 16 March in 1939, the observance and celebration became divorced from any attachment to the Protestant Church. It was “removed completely out of the church calendar” and celebrations were only held on Sundays because people were not at work.10

From 1942 on, the Nazis forbade the Church to participate or compete in any way with their own Heldengedenktag celebrations. Instead, the German government wanted a “strict differentiation” making Heldengedenktag a day for the remembrance and celebration of the military dead while Totensonntag was left to the Church as purely a day for remembering the civilian dead. The Church did involve itself in commemorating the military dead by holding special services of remembrance and by caring for the souls of the widowed and orphaned. The nominally illegal celebrations by the church were

9 Axel Kapust, Der Beitrag der Evangelischen Kirche zum Volkstrauertag (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004) 95-6, 98-9, 100-11, 118-9.

10 Ibid., 119, 122, 124-6, 132-3.
tolerated only because the people requested them. The Church was eventually allowed to offer its own services on *Heldengedenktag*, but not under any officially-approved auspices or as a portion of the Nazi-organized program.\textsuperscript{11} In spite of their earlier support of civic mourning rituals, whether in the early form of *Volkstrauertag* or the National Socialist-modified *Heldengedenktag*, in 1945 the Protestant leadership was hesitant to support the continuance of such practices any longer.

Besides their participation in Nazi-led memorial ceremonies and their own use of the dead for patriotic-nationalist political aims, the Protestant Church in 1945 was aware of its own role in supporting conservative politics and assisting the Nazis, about which it felt some shame. Protestant clergy had shared an “antidemocratic conservative German nationalist or *völkisch* inclination” without exception before the war. This led German Protestants to easily conflate right-wing “national interests” in politics with a religious calling to further Protestantism. The right-wing nationalist parties relied in large part on Protestants for votes and these voters heralded the rise of National Socialism “without great scruple.” Still, out of the church came a center of opposition to Hitler, though not necessarily a democratic one: the Confessing Church, whose members were more concerned with materialism and secularization, as well as older conservative-partriarchal class interests.\textsuperscript{12} The post war chaos for the church was enhanced because in order to reform themselves, the German Protestants needed to rebuild their institution. In the words of historian Frederic Spotts, the old German Protestant Church “was clearly a

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Ibid., 132-3, 134.}
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grave embarrassment to Protestants and too tainted a foundation upon which to rebuild an ecclesiastical structure.”

The Protestant Church of Germany was formally re-established as a new entity in July of 1948. This new body consisted of a “loose confederation [of regional churches], preserving a basic minimum of organizational continuity and unity.” Even before settling upon the new institutional order, however, in October 1945 Church leaders issued the Stuttgart Confession of Guilt, publicly announcing the fault of the Church and the German people in failing to oppose the Nazis. Many Protestants rejected the notion of a national “solidarity of guilt,” criticizing these theologians’ unconcern for Germans’ own suffering during and after the war. Germans outside the church also felt outrage since this proclamation of guilt carried more weight than mere religious principle. In 1945 the churches “fill[ed] the void left by the disappearance of German governmental authority” and were “de facto leadership of the nation.” During the Occupation, “the military government was in competition with the churches for the people’s allegiance” because “most Germans would look to the churches rather than to the military government for guidance.” This early confrontation between reform-minded Protestant clergy and the German people illustrates the churches’ desire in 1945 to “assum[e] responsibility for the broad social interests of the German people,” a testament to “the moral strength” that the Protestant churches now exerted.

13 Frederick Spotts, *The Churches and Politics in Germany* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) 10. Nota Bene: Spotts uses the English adjective “Evangelical” while I use “Protestant” to refer to the same “Evangelisch” confession, because “evangelical” has assumed a fundamentalist meaning in the United States not shared by the German example.

14 Spotts 10-12; Jochman, 557, 558-9; Text of Stuttgart Confession quoted in Spotts, 11.

During these early months after the war, the Protestant Church was uncertain of how best to deal with the memory of the dead, leaving different Regional Churches (Landeskirchen) to provide guidance to their members and await decisions from the national church leadership. In February 1946, in the first springtime after the war, the Protestant Church in Saxony alerted its clergy that their interests “would not be served” by allowing a special Heldengedenktag or Volkstrauertag in the coming weeks. Instead, both the celebration of the battlefield dead and those killed at the home front would occur on the traditional Totenfest at the end of the church year. At the same time, the Protestant Church in Hannover informed its pastors that the leadership had begun their own internal discussion of whether or not to revert back to the pre-Nazi Volkstrauertag or not. While these discussions were ongoing, the Hanoverian Church ordered that during the Easter season, on Reminscere Sunday, the local churches should all hold special services to remember the “victims of the war,” and “specifically…the fallen.”

By March of 1946, the Council of the Protestant Church of Germany announced that all churches might observe the Heldengedenktag in March of 1946. It appears that the Church was reluctant to allow this resumption of older practices, as it attributed its decision purely to the “overwhelming familiarity” for the Nazi-implemented Heldengedenktag that still existed amongst the congregations. In the same breath, the Church declared that, in the coming years, this sort of remembrance of the fallen soldiers should be incorporated into the Totensonntag service at the end of the church year. In this moment the church leaders were faced with popular demand for some form of official commemoration, particularly

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17 Verordnungs- und Nachrichtenblatt, March 1946, copy of newspaper clipping, EZA 7/3090.
one that conformed to the practices people were accustomed to. However, the church’s hesitancy to revive the older forms of remembrance point to its larger desire to distance itself from any outward association with the National Socialist past. In this instance, the church was prepared to make a small doctrinal adjustment for the benefit of their congregations, in hopes that they too would soon be ready to “move on.”

The high church leadership, rejecting the resumption of a Heldengedenktag or springtime Volkstrauertag, did not quickly agree on an alternative solution. In December 1946 the Chancellery of the Protestant Church wrote to the Regional Churches that a special committee was searching for a “unified ruling” on this question of how and with what form of memorial to remember the dead. Because they sought a common solution for the entire Protestant Church of Germany, this letter asked the Regional Churches to share their opinions with the Protestant Church of Germany’s committee as soon as possible. They enclosed an opinion paper already submitted to the committee from the High Church Council in Oldenbourg, prepared by Bishop Stählen. He recommended that instead of holding both a general Totensonntag and a special remembrance day for the fallen, the church should initiate “a day of remembrance for those who have passed on,” which would include World War I and World War II dead. This new observance should be held at the beginning of November, representing a break with past practices and habits tainted by the Third Reich. Stählin criticized other groups of Germans who preferred to maintain the Heldengedenktag/Volkstrauertag practices, employing liturgical concerns to attack them. The spring memory day was traditionally held on a Sunday during the Easter season, which the Stählin maintained would be a fundamental “misunderstanding.”
of the liturgical themes of Easter.\textsuperscript{18} This concern for maintaining proper observance of the church calendar emerged early in the discussion among the religious leadership but proved crucial in the church’s formulation of its preferred memorial day arrangement, as well as allowing the church to criticize those with alternative suggestions.

Doctrinal uniformity among Protestants could not be realized as long as individual churches themselves were divided on this question. While the Chancellery directed the Regional Churches to read Stählin’s letter and consider his arguments, the Protestant Church in Saxony had decided to establish its’ new “Memory Day for the Fallen” on the disputed Sunday \textit{Reminiscere}, despite concern for the imprropriety of incorporating such practice into the Easter season (introducing a “Cult of the Dead”) or the question of lay confusion regarding the meaning of the name \textit{Reminiscere} (that it “can be easily filled with new content”). Moreover, the Saxon church believed that Easter season presented the right frame of death and salvation that made remembering the fallen soldiers more suited to that time over any other:

In order to expose and fight every false understanding of how the church has taught people through the word of God to understand the millions of deaths brought by the war, namely, as God’s judgment, [this \textit{Reminiscere} Memory Day] should be celebrated as a second Confession Sunday in the church year.\textsuperscript{19}

Interestingly, the Saxon Church did not acknowledge the outward appearance of continuity with Nazi-era practices. Rather, it believed that memorializing German soldiers was the best way that it could separate itself from the “contempt” voiced by the

\textsuperscript{18} Kanzlei der EKD an alle Landeskirchenregierungen, 8 December 1946, copy of position paper from Bischof Stählin, EZA 7/3090.

\textsuperscript{19} Kirchenleitung der Kirchenprovinz Sachsen an den Evangelischen Oberkirchenrat, 15 January 1947, letter, EZA 7/3090.
rest of the world against the actions of the German Wehrmacht.\(^{20}\) Besides Regional Churches taking positions contrary to the liturgical concern for preserving a “pure” Easter season (and discontinuing the Nazi-tainted practices), some churches decided to both hold the *Totensonntag* observance for all the dead in November and recreate the *Volkstrauertag* observance for the war’s dead, but on a different day. The Brandenburg Church in February 1947 attempted just such a compromise, allowing individual congregations to decide whether or not to hold both memorial days or observe just the traditional *Totensonntag*.\(^{21}\) Shortly thereafter the Pomeranian Church leadership expressed its overall agreement with the proposal circulated by Stählin earlier.\(^{22}\)

In considering the *Volkstrauertag/Heldengedenktag* and *Totensonntag* question, the Protestant Church was faced with either eliminating the older spring observance and upsetting their congregations or allowing it to take place, outwardly maintaining continuity with practices of the Weimar and National Socialist eras. Another option available to the church was to incorporate remembrance of the war’s dead into the *Totensonntag* observance, which had been the Church’s sole remembrance day since 1939.\(^{23}\) Others suggested a new holiday, separate from the existing ones. Aside from the question of when to remember, the church was also fractured on the question of whom to remember: the fallen soldiers of World War II? The fallen soldiers from both World Wars

\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) Evangelsiches Konsistorium Mark-Brandenburg an die Kanzlei der Evangelischen Kirche, 6 February 1947, EZA 7/3090.

\(^{22}\) Evangelsiches Konsistorium Pommern an den Evangelischen Oberkirchenrat, 8 March 1947, letter, EZA 7/3090.

\(^{23}\) Kapust, 126. Interestingly, *Totensonntag* was created by Prussian king Frederick William II in 1816 as a general memorial day for the dead in the wake of the Prussian wars against Napoleon Bonaparte, giving it a history not dissimilar from *Volkstrauertag* in the twentieth century. *See Lexicon für Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd edition (Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder, 2001), s.v. *Totensonntag*
I and II? The “victims” of the war, however defined? All the dead? The congregations shared this concern, as a letter from a congregation member to the church leadership expressed. Erich Schmitt pointed out that those people “who were murdered for political reasons” were not being properly remembered through his pastor’s sermons. He further worried that the clergy had not been thoroughly denazified, and that some unreformed Nazi party members were still preaching, more than a year after the end of the war.24

This concern for the Protestant Church’s reformation illustrates the tension felt within the church leadership and the congregations after the war’s end. The Allied military occupation of Germany removed all functioning German governments and eliminated the Germany military without reaching into the church. Thus, as an element of stability and continuity amidst disruptions in the lives of Germans, the church’s position was enhanced because it was allowed to exist as it had before.25 As mourning Germans sought comfort and guidance from their pastors, there was no consensus of what was permissible to preach and observe, or when it was proper to do so. While the Church searched for a solution pleasing to all, another party to the debate stood up in 1948 who already had a proposal it claimed was unanimously supported.

The Volksbund deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge (VDK)

Opposite from the Protestant Church stood the Volksbund deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, who advocated a clear path to orchestrating a memory of the war that would quickly collide with the Protestant leaders’ reservations about past practices.


A civic group dedicated to caring for military cemeteries and organizing the memorial services for fallen soldiers, the VDK had existed since the end of the First World War. The *Volksbund* “claimed control over all activities associated with remembering the fallen” and though it had worked with the Nazis to support their memory and propagandizing of the dead, after the war much of the leadership of the *Volksbund* remained in place, ready to continue its heroization of the dead. While these activities eventually extended to include victims of the Nazis as well, these remembrance practices were grounded in local communities, involving not only older generations, but also younger ones too in the preservation of graves.26 This group also assumed an active voice in the conversations over how best to memorialize the soldiers and victims of the Second World War. While the Protestant Church looked for answers, the VDK in 1946 advocated the re-initiation of the *Heldengedenktag* observance on the disputed Sunday *Reminiscere*.27 The VDK appeared willing to resurrect a form of mourning from the recent German past, despite its association with the Third Reich, because the holiday predated the Nazis. This enabled the VDK to advocate merely returning to traditional practices, ignoring the Protestant Church’s desire for clearly delineating German history before 1945 from what would come after.

In November 1947 the *Volksbund* sent a letter to the Protestant High Church Council, offering its suggestions about which memorial service to observe and why. It called for a Memory Day for the Victims of the War, which would be observed on the


27 Stählin criticizes the VDK in his opinion paper from 2 December 1946, contained in Kanzlei der EKD an alle Landeskirchenregierungen, 8 December 1946 EZA 7/3090.
Sunday Reminiscere. The VDK preferred this date because the German people were already accustomed to observing Volkstrauertag or Heldengedenktag on this day and German pastors whom they had polled agreed that such a date would be best. Bolstering its case, the Volksbund claimed to voice the desires of the German peoples, who themselves preferred the continuation of a unanimous, simultaneous day of memory for the war’s victims.

In a long position paper, the Volksbund explained why the organization saw the spring memorial day proposal as most suitable. Professing a desire to avoid any politicization or “distortion” of the war’s memory, the Volksbund reminded the Church that it (VDK) had in 1920 first suggested a Volkstrauertag be held during the Passion season. The Weimar government, the churches, and the German people together had joined on this day to remember “without distinction between confession, party, or race.” The VDK recognized that the Nazis changed the timbre of the memorial observance, from individual reflection and remembrance to a “demonstration of the desires for political power” but asserted that this very “falsification” of the proper understanding of Volkstrauertag accounted for people’s hesitancy towards readopting it. Providing this historical basis for the memorial day gave the Volksbund an avenue to also advocate some departure from Nazi practices.

In arguing its case to the church, the Volksbund assumed a moral stance as well, invoking the innumerable deaths and unquantifiable suffering of the Second World War as reasons why Germans could not and should not be denied the opportunity to grieve and remember. The VDK explained that this memory of the victims of the war already existed among the German people, and must be channeled into a proper day of
remembrance. If authorities ignored this latent memory, the danger of renewed glorification of war and death would inevitably result. The *Volksbund* argued that this raw memory required reshaping to allow it to exist in a positive form, along the lines of the original *Volkstrauertag*. Given the confessional division in Germany, the VDK considered it “absurd” to create a new *Volkstrauertag* on one of the preexisting church “remembrance of the dead days” like *Totensonntag*. Such a move would have defeated any unity offered by a new day of memory. Moreover, the plurality of suffering—whether the dead or those left behind—could not be combined with a general memory for those whose deaths were unrelated to the war. In the eyes of the *Volksbund*, the “soldier- and civilian victims of the war [were] due their own day of memory and mourning.”

Besides historical and moral claims in favor of a renewed *Volkstrauertag* on *Reminiscere* Sunday the VDK also made liturgical arguments. Because of the somber attention to religious themes like salvation and resurrection, this particular Sunday was well-suited for mourning and beginning a new chapter in the life of Germany. While the VDK pledged no objection if the church found a more suitable place in the calendar for *Volkstrauertag*, it wanted no confession-specific days for the commemoration. They hoped to convince the Protestant Church “that the re-introduction of a Day of Memory [was] the spoken wish of the largest part of the German people” and that it was Germans’ undeniable “honorable duty” to remember all fellow citizens who died. Such a day of memory for all victims of war was needed to symbolize remembrance of the dead and to allow all people to reflect and arrive at a greater appreciation of the necessity of peace.

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29 Ibid.
As the Protestant Church wrestled with the riddle of how to remember the fallen soldiers, dead civilians, and murdered victims, the Volksbund stood ready to implement their well-formulated solution. The Volksbund was willing to allow the continuation of practices from the “old” Germany, albeit with expanded emphases and perhaps less nationalist content in order to bring comfort to Germans during this period of intense disruption and crisis. The Protestant Church on the other hand, had several proposals before it: They could keep the “old” German practices, despite their association with the Nazi years. They could move the emphasis on the war’s dead to the more general Totensonntag in November, allowing a directed remembrance of those who fell in battle and those civilians who lost their lives. Or the Church could create a new day of remembrance for Volkstrauertag, separating it from Totensonntag, but also eliminating the association with the Nazi era remembrance practices. The intense contest that followed proved to be irresolvable by these two parties on their own.

The Contest

Languages of Disunity

The Protestant Church of Germany and the Volksbund each used a specifically constructed language to argue about memorial practice. While they agreed on the necessity of remembering the dead and creating a day set aside for commemoration, the two disagreed on what form these practices should assume, when they should occur, and how they should reflect previous commemorative rites. While the VDK advocated continuing the older practices without the parts corrupted by the Nazis, the Church eventually called for a complete break with commemorative rituals practiced before
1945. Beneath this argument over when and whom to mourn was the question of how far post-War Germans would distance themselves from the customs of National Socialism. Since differing factions within the Regional Protestant Churches were still negotiating their exact positions on commemoration, the church could consolidate its position only after it was challenged by the Volksbund. While both parties in this dispute claimed the authority to direct Germans’ memory of the Second World War, they claimed different sources for their legitimacy.

One month after the Volksbund proposed returning to the Reminiscere Volkstrauertag, the Lutheran Regional Churches, comprising ten of the twenty-seven total Regional Churches,⁴⁰ unanimously decided to honor both the Memory of the Fallen and all other Victims of the War in November, holding the more traditional Totensonntag but on a new date, positioning their Totensonntag on the Catholic All Soul’s Day. While the High Church Council met with representatives of the VDK and expressed some support for its suggestions, the religious leadership felt that in the Passion season, foregrounding the memory of the war’s dead would disrupt the proper observance of the liturgical meaning of the word, “Reminiscere,” improperly placing the duty to honor the war dead above the observances in preparation for Easter.⁴¹ The church emphasized that the proper observance of the war’s dead and the memory of the dead should occur somewhere near the end of the church calendar, where the themes of “Death, Judgment,

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⁴¹ Latin for „remember,” „Reminiscere“ is the name of the second Sunday in Lent in the German Protestant Church’s calendar. The name references Psalm 25:6, which urges remembrance of God’s love and mercy, but makes no reference to death. Karl-Heinrich Bieritz, Das Kirchenjahr. Feste, Gedenke- und Feiertage in Geschichte und Gegenwart (Berlin: Union Verlag, 1986), 98-9; Ps 25:6.
and Eternity” were already liturgically enshrined. From their theological standpoint, it was “[i]n this part of the church year [that] the old church [had] already furnished a legitimate place for the Memory of the Dead.”32 Their concern for proper liturgical observance allowed the Protestant Church to mount its opposition to the Reminiscere commemoration without explicit reference to its Nazi affiliation.

As the Protestants united in their opposition to the Reminiscere proposal, the Volksbund became argumentative and even confrontational in its response. The VDK wrote to the senior Protestant leadership formally objecting to their position on the memorial day, simultaneously asking the Regional Churches to side with the Volksbund on this question. The VDK believed the church was ignoring their own participation in the older Volkstrauertag on Reminiscere, an arrangement that had been accepted by all parties before the present dispute. They considered a unified memorial day best for properly remembering the dead and thought it shameful that, in a time of fractious politics and social disorder, Germans were divided even in fulfilling their “duty of memory.” The Volksbund’s letter ended with a challenge: if the church did not resolve to celebrate a memorial observance on Reminiscere, the VDK, claiming to hear the earnest desires of the German people, vowed to celebrate its own remembrance day on Reminiscere, with or without the church.33 By claiming their own authority to speak for the hearts of millions of grieving Germans, the VDK raised the stakes, shifting its language from merely favoring past, pre-Nazi practices to favoring a united (west)


33 Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge an die Kanzlei der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, 14 February 1949, letter, EZA 7/3090.
German mourning. Although such *Reminiscere* memorials were habit by 1945, concern about maintaining practices appropriated by the Nazis escaped the *Volksbund*’s public statements. Instead, their appeal to German unity through commemoration was heightened by the continued division of the German lands into occupation zones. In February 1949, even as the western occupation zones were being increasingly coalesced into a semi-sovereign state, the eastern zone was becoming further isolated.34

The confrontation between proper liturgical practice and united observance of memory continued for the next three years. In early 1952 the Protestant Church leadership circulated to its Regional Churches new internal VDK correspondence which professed willingness to compromise but also asserted that the Catholic Church and the new President of the German Parliament both favored the *Reminiscere* memorial observance. The VDK sent letters to the Federal President, the Chancellor, the Interior Minister, and to leadership boards of several civic organizations, seeking support from the war disabled and bereaved, those returning from the east, organizations of former career soldiers, eastern German landowners, and reunion groups for the paratrooper divisions and the *Afrika Korps*. The lower level *Volksbund* members were instructed to prepare for the coming March celebration of *Volkstrauertag*, with the Protestant Church’s participation. Hoping to demonstrate Germans’ national support for a spring observance, the *Volksbund* believed this would persuade the Protestant Church to cease its objections.

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34 The Federal Republic of Germany was founded in May 1949, the German Democratic Republic in October 1949. The two states were the end result of tensions between the three Western Powers (United States, the United Kingdom, and France) and the Soviet Union, which came to a head in the Berlin Crisis of 1948-1949. See Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 145-153.
For the VDK, maintaining Weimar- and Third Reich memorial practices would ensure a unified and proper memory of the war.\(^{35}\)

While their appeal to veterans’ organizations might indicate conservative nationalism driving the VDK’s initiative, the same letter also instructed the local organizations to prevent any political parties or (especially) right-extremist groups from any participation in such commemorative events. The *Volksbund* wanted to preserve the appearance of their pure desire to remember the fallen and the victims of the Second World War. However, strengthening their position required the VDK to find support from these very same sympathetic parties, leaving the church unconvinced of their sincerity. In this same letter to its Regional leadership the Protestant Church included mention that the Church Council was unlikely to alter its position from 1949, and that the Bavarian Protestant Church had begun using yet another Sunday in November to remember the dead of the war, avoiding the *Reminiscere* option at all costs.$^{36}$ Aside from leaving the Church leaders unmoved in their decision, the VDK’s simultaneous appeal to German unity and to military-related groups and nationalist elements of society would cause many Germans to feel uncomfortable with the *Volksbund*’s position.

**Intervention and Resolution**

While the threat from the *Volksbund* did not alter the Protestant Church’s resolve, the intervention of a third party to the dispute did much to affect a resolution. Weeks after the VDK issued its challenge, the Chancellery of the Protestant Church issued to its

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\(^{35}\) EKD Kirchenkanzlei an die Leitungen der deutschen evangelisch Landeskirchen, 20 January 1952, letter, EZA 7/3090.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
Regional Church leadership a copy of a letter from the Interior Minister of the still-new Federal Republic. The senior leadership of the church was pleased that the Interior Minister entered into the discussion and felt hopeful that such an engagement would give impetus for a final decision (in its favor).

In his letter to the *Volksbund*, the Interior Minister acknowledged that the interior ministries of the states as well as the two churches all supported a November holiday and felt a *Reminiscere* observance unacceptable. While a unified observance was necessary for a unified memory, the Interior Minister reproached the VDK, saying that the re-initiation of the *Reminiscere* observances was also precluded by other “weighty political considerations,” of which the VDK were aware. Rejecting all historical precedent to support the spring holiday, the Minister forbade the observance of any *Volkstrauertag* in March 1952, explaining that elections scheduled on that particular Sunday in Wurttemberg and Baden, could not be held earlier or later. He concluded that the remembrance observance must be held in November, and reiterated his support for a fixed, unanimous day for commemoration of the war’s dead.37

With this intervention, the new West German government both overturned the *Volksbund*’s suggestions for continuity with pre-Nazi practices and defused its call for unity. The new government was unwilling to allow this reincarnation of forms of remembering from either the Weimar era or the National Socialist period. In effect, a “clean break with the past” was very much the issue here for both the German government and the Protestant Church. While allowing the necessary memories to be expressed, the Federal Interior Ministry would only permit such expression in a way that

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37 EKD Kirchenkanzlei an der deutschen evangelischen Landeskirchen in Westdeutschland, 6 February 1952, letter, EZA 7/3090.
reflected a new Germany. Bolstered in their stance for a November observance, the Protestant churches more actively opposed the Reminiscere memorial day, going so far as to issue guidelines to pastors in areas where its observance was already taking place.

After reminding the Regional Churches of the inappropriateness of a Reminiscere observance, the Chancellery instructed all pastors asked to take part in civic memorial services not preach in a way that glorified the dead, but only that glorified Jesus Christ. Pastors were urged to adopt a common, unified position against further suggestion for Reminiscere as Volkstrauertag, in preparation for the criticisms of unhappy congregants. The Protestant leadership also prescribed guidelines for pastors who were in areas where the Volkstrauertag would be observed on Reminiscere. These guideline were to keep them in the proper frame of mind (that is, to refuse their support) during such observances. Pastors were reminded:

(1) In the every case we are opposed to the ungrounded differentiation of the war’s dead from the rest of the dead. (2) In every case we reject the glorification of the soldier’s death in the service of a newly developing nationalism. (3) We respond against the mistaken teaching that has been received up to now, that those who die for the Fatherland receive on the other side a special fate, apart from the rest. We testify against any new Valhalla Myth with the seriousness of the judgment of God. (4) We want to avoid the danger of any sentimental remarks about death (which many seek and enjoy) and much more fight the customary weakness and carelessness of attitude towards the dead (and those still imprisoned), calling upon the customary tradition and to brotherly preparedness to help one another in the monstrous seriousness of our historic hour. 38

The senior Protestant leadership made clear their expectations that the church present itself as unified and prepared to rally against the VDK by early 1952. At this moment it

38 Kirchenkanzlei an die Leitungen der deutschen evangelischen Landeskirchen in Westdeutschland, 20 February 1952, letter, EZA 7/3090.
was hopeful that at last a commonly-agreed upon November Sunday for the
Volkstauertag could be found through discussions with the Catholic bishops.39

Not only was the Protestant Church working to secure agreement and recognition
of a November Volkstrauertag with the Catholic Church, officers of the Federal
government were actively seeking the acceptance and participation of the Volksbund,
while asking them to forego any further agitation for a Spring memorial day. As the
consensus of all parties appeared to be crystallizing in support of November observance,
hopes were high within the Protestant Church that by 1953 all parties would agree on a
common rule. While some Regional Churches, such as the Hanoverian State Church, had
been prepared to instruct their member bodies to continue their local practices, by the end
of February 1952, the Hanoverian leadership too was hopeful that a decision would soon
come that ruled the Volkstrauertag to be held in November. The Hanoverian churches
were told that “[o]n 9 March of this year (Reminiscere Sonntag), Volkstrauertag [would]
be celebrated by neither the state, nor the Volksbund, nor the Church.”40 For the
Protestant Church, the authoritative establishment of the November memorial day and the
termination of the March observance were nigh.

While the Church was hopeful, the Federal Interior Minister alerted the Interior
Ministries of the States that the VDK would only support Reminiscere as the
Volkstrauertag until the entire Federal Republic (including West Berlin) found a new day

39 Evangelisches Konsistorium Berlin-Brandenburg an den Herrn Geistlichen von Berlin-Brandenburg, 28
February 1952, letter, EZA 7/3090.

40 Evangelischen-Lutherischen Landeskirchen Hannover an die Herrn Superintendenten, 29 February 1952,
letter, EZA 7/3090. Interestingly, throughout March 1952, the members of the German Bundestag did not
engage in floor debate over the question of when to hold Volkstrauertag. The debate between
the Protestant Church and the Volksbund was not discussed by their representatives in the public arena of the
Band 11 (Bonn: Bonner Universitäts Buchdruckerei, 1952).
agreeable to everybody. He also underlined the necessity of using a Sunday free of any existing political or confessional content. The Minister felt that early November would be the best time for such an observance, but acknowledged that he still waited for all other interested organizations to concur. Finally, the VDK also agreed to support the November observance and cancelled their plans for a March commemoration. The support of the Volksbund meant that “now the broadest base” possible for such an agreement had crystallized. The Minister concluded that he considered it a general agreement, then, that the States would unanimously support the 2nd Sunday before the 1st Sunday of Advent as the date for Volkstrauertag and hoped for the fullest support of the VDK in realizing this goal of a universal observance for honoring the dead.  

With this apparent and long-awaited consensus, the rules were laid down, not just by the churches and the Volksbund, but by legislators as well. The Protestant leadership in Berlin distributed to its member churches in November 1952 a ruling from the Berlin Senate. This legislation approved on 30 October 1952, literally at the eleventh hour, decreed that the Volkstrauertag and remembrance of the “Victims of the War” should be held on the 2nd Sunday before Advent, fixing the commemoration of the war and the dead in November, guaranteeing a break with the past.

41 EKD Kirchenkanzlei an die Leitungen der deutschen evangelischen Landeskirchen, 16 March 1952, forwarding a letter from the Bundesinnensminister, EZA 7/3090. These internal communications from the Protestant Church do not offer much information about the Catholic Church’s position. While the objection to using Allerseelen could have arisen from either the Catholic Church or the Volksbund, the CDU/CSU may have independently exerted pressure on the Catholics to abandon their earlier support for the spring holiday. Similarly, the Federal Interior Minister may have pressured the Volksbund to support the fall observance due the ongoing discussions of amnesty for Germans convicted in denazification tribunals. See Frei, Adenauer’s Germany.

42 EKD Kirchenkanzlei, Berliner Stelle, an die Evangelischen Kirche der altpreußischen Union Kirchenkanzlei Berlin, 13 November 1952, letter bearing a copy of the recently passed legislation by the West Berlin Senate, regulating the observance of Volkstrauertag, EZA 7/3090. This legislation did not originate at the federal level, despite the involvement of both the Federal Interior Minister and each state’s own Interior Minister. Throughout October and November 1952, the Bundestag did not debate the question
Hereby Resolved?

Both the Church and the new federal and state governments rearranged post-War commemorative practices to look quite different from the Third Reich. By eschewing historical precedents for the Volkstrauertag, they implicitly acknowledged their desires to distance themselves and the German people from activities reminiscent of the Nazi years. Under the 1952 agreements, public desires to remember and to honor the past were not allowed to resume these earlier forms, but were redirected and forced to encompass the entire German past – victims, perpetrators, and everyone in between. Changing the forms of memory’s observance redefined the terms of memory’s observance, disrupting what German people were accustomed to in order to prevent further uncritical complacency with nationalism and reverence of the military. This departure from past practices was intended by the Church to be an early step on the path to a more inclusive memory and post-war society.

Following Germany’s surrender, uncertain pastors had looked to their superiors for guidance in leading their grieving congregations. Thus, the dispute over when and how to mourn the dead was firmly anchored at the local congregations’ level. During and after the negotiations, how did pastors minister to their mourning communities? Did pastors reflect the Protestant leadership’s concerns about shaping Germans’ memories of the war and attitude towards the military in their Volkstrauertag and Totensonntag

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of Volkstrauertag’s date. Only a passing mention of the EKD Synod’s recent meeting and the questions posed to the Bundestag are reflected in the stenographic record. Verhandlungen des Deutschen Bundestages. I. Wahlperiode 1949. Stenographische Berichte Band 14 (Bonn: Bonner Universitäts Buchdruckerei, 1952)
sermons? During these rituals of public mourning, did bereaved Germans hear messages familiar to them?
CHAPTER 3
WHOM TO MOURN

Pastoral Care

While control over *Volkstrauertag* was disputed, the German Protestant Church alone directed *Totensonntag* – a day for congregations to contemplate recent deaths and order their memories. Through their sermons, pastors could frame remembrance of the dead in ways divorced from Nazi-era practices, complementing their superiors’ efforts to influence *Volkstrauertag*. A survey of sermons preached on these days, from 1945 until 1962, reveals several interconnected religious tropes employed to explain death and offer comfort to the bereaved.\(^{43}\) While these devices may have sounded familiar to congregations, their deployment in this period of uncertainty is significant in new ways. While Germans under occupation and later pressure from the Cold War made sense of the war and their memories, pastors centered their attention on God and God’s powers, the role God assigns to death, and other avenues of contemplating the deaths of so many loved ones. Beyond offering comfort and consolation, these pastors’ words made equal the pain and death of all people, whether soldiers or civilians.

\(^{43}\) While the education level and politics of the pastors selected for this study may make them less representative of German society after the War, their use of older religious tropes for newer memory traditions illustrates well the pastor’s role of encouraging certain memories while discouraging others.
Remembering the Dead

War, death, judgment

Many of the pastors who preached on one of these days in the immediate post-War years emphasized God’s power to control and even to reverse death. They suggested that, despite the violence of war, Christians could believe God exercised selection and gave order to violence and death. To comfort their flock, these pastors also emphasized God’s ability to reverse death, pointing to the Biblical story of Jesus’ resurrection and God’s promise to resurrect faithful Christians, allowing them to live eternally in heaven. Additionally, pastors alluded to the judgment of God that faithful Christians would endure before reaching heaven. From the first moments after the war, pastors tried to shape Germans’ memories and actions.

Lübeck pastor Gerhard Gülzow began his 1945 Totensonntag sermon, by remembering “the soldiers from the brave Wehrmacht,” the “many innocent victims who…fell as victims of the terrible madness of the [aerial-] bombing war,” the Germans who died as their cities in the east and the west were besieged and taken, as well as expellees of the eastern territories. However, he did not restrict his attention to Germans’ suffering alone. Besides remembering the violence of war, Gülzow also preached God’s power over death, invoking the Biblical story of Lazarus as an example. While Gülzow acknowledged that the “most monstrous memory that one can conceive” was that so many people died [lit: “fell”] in the early months of 1945, he concluded that understanding Jesus’ death and resurrection provided a way for Christians to look past death, acknowledging God’s power of resurrection. This acknowledgment gave his
congregation hope of reaching the promised afterlife, no mater the hopelessness or fear in their lives on earth.\textsuperscript{44}

In 1946, Gülzow preached the power of God over death but also presented his power to comfort the bereaved. An expellee from Danzig, Gülzow addressed a community in Lübeck that also had been forced to leave former eastern German lands at the war’s end.\textsuperscript{45} In 1946 he counseled his congregation not to dwell on the hardships of war and death, instead suggesting they acknowledge God’s powers over death as a source of comfort. Gülzow remembered the dead resting in graves outside the old \textit{Heimat} and recognized the pain of families who in 1946 still did not know where their loved ones were buried and could not lay flowers on their gravestones. He also recognized the pain of families who did not know whether their loved ones were dead or alive. The pain arising from death and uncertainty, preached Gülzow, could only be assuaged by Jesus’ comfort and control over earthly events.\textsuperscript{46}

Gülzow also reminded his 1946 congregation that God’s final judgment loomed over them. Centering attention on judgment reminded surviving and mourning Germans that their own deaths were inevitable, making it urgent they please God with their actions before they too died. Gülzow told his congregation that the \textit{Totenfest} should not be a time of sadness, but instead a time when the living were reminded that judgment of God looms over them yet.\textsuperscript{47} This pastor’s attention to God’s control directed congregations

\textsuperscript{44} Gerhard Gülzow, sermon, Totensonntag 1945, Nachlaß Gerhard Gülzow, EZA 607/11, 2, 3-5.


\textsuperscript{46} Gerhard Gülzow, sermon, 24 November 1946 (Totenfest), Nachlaß Gerhard Gülzow, EZA 607/11, 1, 4-5.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 3-4.
towards a more positive view of death as something limited by God. Reminding people of the final judgment also presented an imperative to the listener: prepare for your own judgment by pleasing God with your own life.

Together, these tropes of death could turn congregations’ emotions away from the pain of bereavement even though the war was not yet a distant memory. Against the context of large numbers of civilian and military casualties, this focus away from the sadness of death is significant. These pastors not only sought to provide emotional comfort to their grieving congregations but also to defuse any anger or resentment that might have lain beneath the surface of grief.

A new beginning

Pastors also sought to defuse anger and resentment by preaching a conception of death as a new beginning – a transition towards eternal life in heaven and therefore not something to be dreaded and mourned. They used this trope alongside conceptions of death as controlled by God and stress on the final judgment to slowly create a space where “death” knew only positive connotations. The attention to death also slowly lost immediate attachment to the war experience.

Gerhard Gülzow told his congregation in 1947 that death represented not an end but something new. He told his congregation that “[t]he world of today is ripe for death” and encouraged his congregation to think about death as a new beginning, a moment harkening a “new life of the people and of mankind.” In presenting death as the instance when the old order falls away and a new order can begin, Gülzow led the congregation to pray that God would guide the “discussions over the fate of [the German] people, Europe
and perhaps the world” and deliver a world living as the model of peace and a “true justice.” Gülzow also presented God’s power over death in 1947. He referenced the large numbers of dead witnessed by his community, insisting that death was not the end of human life, but signified a moment of “breaking-out” [Aufbruch] for Jesus’ power over death. Rather than creating sadness, Gülzow preached, death should remind people of God’s protection and comfort. Despite longing for their old homes in the east, Gülzow told his listeners, God’s promise of eternal life meant their “suffering, and cries and tears and crisis would be no more.” In addition, Gülzow contemplated the temporariness of human life, warning his congregation not to dwell on death, but to prepare for the end of their earthly lives and their renewal through eternal life.49

Other pastors also reconceptualized death as the beginning of something new and more desirable. Pastor and Professor of Theology Walter Dress reminded his congregation in 1947 that Christians could believe in the coming resurrection of their beloved dead. He argued that death was not something to be dreaded because of the attendant resurrection and promise of eternal life, both for those still living in 1947 and those already dead. Dress also explained away the mystery and irrationality of death, encouraging his congregation in Berlin-Dahlem to anticipate the eventual day when Jesus would raise all Christians up from the dead. Dress proposed an end to painful memory, claiming that the sorrow over graves could be overturned by consciousness of God’s power to reverse death, after the model of Jesus’ resurrection. Dress concluded that this “living hope” allowed Christians to live on earth without fear of death and uncertainty.

48 Gerhard Gülzow, sermon, 23 November 1947 (Totensonntag), Nachlaß Gerhard Gülzow, EZA 607/11, 3.

49 Gerhard Gülzow, sermon, 23 November 1947 (Totensonntag), Nachlaß Gerhard Gülzow, EZA 607/11, 2-3.
and allowed a memory of the dead as baptized Christians whom Jesus had promised to
one day resurrect. In Dress’ eyes, Christians need not despair or live in anguish because
they and their loved ones already dead awaited their promised resurrection.50

Berlin Professor Heinrich Vogel presented the looming judgment of God in 1948,
introducing the parable of the unfertile fig tree and comparing the German people to this
barren tree. He decried the way people of the world dishonored God, proclaiming that
the world was an “orgy of power-seeking, money-seeking, of hatred and greed.”
Addressing materialism and consumption he felt excessive so soon after the war, Vogel
specified that “[the congregation members] really do not need to think of the outer world,
instead [they] have this in [their] middle before [their] eyes.” Returning to the barren
tree, he warned that God preferred to see Germans produce “fruit,” calling on Germans to
please God in their daily lives. “Fruitful” actions included “doing good deeds, acting
mercifully, helping one another and serving one another.” “Fruit” also meant justice, love
and peace in families and in society.51 Producing these “fruits” would leave Germans
little time dwell on their pain of bereavement and their own suffering in the war. Vogel’s
critique of materialism and worldliness is consistent with his critical attitude towards
German guilt after the war. Vogel accepted a shared political guilt for the nation, a
criminal guilt for some specific people, and “attacked the widespread ‘plague’ of self-

50 Walter Dress, sermon, Totensonntag 1947, Nachlaß Walter Dress, EZA 604/4,1-3; Walter Dreß. Die
Theologie Gersons: Eine Untersuchung zur Verbindung von Nationalismus und Mystik im Spätmittelalter
(Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1977).

justification, which arose especially in the face of de-Nazification and the trials of war criminals.”

Preaching in Berlin-Spandau in 1950, Rudolf Weckerling preached God’s power over death and power to comfort. Addressing his congregation’s sorrows (a child dying unexpectedly, a husband dying of sickness, a son falling in battle), he directed their attention onto Jesus’ suffering and dying for Christians. Jesus’ cross, he says, “stands above all the birch-crosses in the entire eastern lands. His cross covers all the innumerable [people] whom the sea took away. All memorial stones, grave memorials, and fresh burial mounds of [Germany’s] cemeteries pay attention to this cross.”

Weckerling implored people to realize they had reason to praise God, because God comforted them in their hardship. Weckerling also minimized Germans’ own pain and suffering by preaching that only Jesus presented “a truly innocent, undeserved pain” and his resurrection testified to God’s power to control or reverse death.

In his 1951 sermon, Gerhard Gülzow varied his presentation of death as a new beginning, framing death as the realization of peace. He asked his congregation to consider death a “protector” and “orderer” of their lives, seeing death “as a rescuer and the great home-bringer of God.” He remarked that those of his congregation who died recently were “thankful” to be able to shed “the weight of these times and lay down in God’s peace.” In recognition that most people in the congregation still viewed death in a negative light, Gülzow encouraged them not to dwell on the horror of death and its

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impact, but to oppose such unsettling thoughts by recalling the end to suffering and pain that God had promised them after death.  

Focusing their congregations’ attention on the promise of resurrection as well as other tropes casting death in a more positive light, these pastors comforted Christians suffering through bereavement. Gazing past death to the promised new afterlife made death something less undesirable. Removing the fear of death transformed it into a new beginning, allowing pastors to diminish their congregations’ anguish, fears, or anger at the deaths of so many, both on and off the battlefield. If the dead had not lost their lives but had gained peace and an eternal new life, Germans had less reason to grieve and harbor resentment.

Reunion through death

After considering God’s powers over death, his judgment, and the new beginning offered by death, pastors also presented death as reunifying event. Such a reconceptualization of death continued this larger, more positive appraisement of death that minimized the pain and suffering. The promises of reunion held special meaning to Germans who were not only separated from loved ones who died abroad but who also lived in a divided present after the war.

Gerhard Gülzow introduced death as a reunion between his congregants and their dead loved ones in 1952, during a special “Memorial worship service for the dead of the Eastern German lands.” He preached that death would bring eternal life and reunification with those loved ones already dead. He maintained that through faith in Christ these

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54 Gerhard Gülzow, sermon, 25 November 1951 (Totensonntag), Nachlaß Gülzow, EZA 607/11, 1-3.
eastern Germans would realize reunion with their beloved dead buried in the old *Heimat*. For those who could not return to Silesia, East Prussia, the Sudetenland, Pomerania or Danzig, reunion with loved ones would come through the resurrection into eternal life.\textsuperscript{55} Using the reunion trope, Gülzow made a thinly veiled political protest against the loss of the former Reich’s eastern territories, consistent with his position as a critic both of the actions of the German and Polish governments during and immediately after the war.\textsuperscript{56} For these grieving Lübeckers, death promised to bring them together with their missing loved ones, not separate them indefinitely. The promise of reunion meant these mourning expellees had less reason to protest their fate. They needed only to await God’s promised reunion.

Bremen pastor Heinz Kloppenburg used the coming judgment of God to steer his congregation’s thoughts away from sorrow in 1955. As the Federal Republic inaugurated a new military service, this vocal opponent of nuclear armament charged his congregation to be ready for their day of judgment, since God would judge people according to what they had done for their fellow humans. He warned that non-Christian lands and peoples could receive more favorable judgment from God than those “Godly” ones and asserted that the “charred synagogues and gassed Jews surely have stood nearer to God’s heart than the Christian churches, which did not risk becoming victims in their own existence in order to hinder these actions.” Kloppenburg argued that in God’s eyes, what Germans did after the war to help others would be most important when they were

\textsuperscript{55} Gerhard Gülzow, sermon, 23 November 1952 (Totenfest), Nachlaß Gerhard Gülzow, EZA 607/11, 2-3.

The judgment promised a chance for Germans to redeem themselves in God’s eyes.

Similarly, in 1956 Gerhard Gülzow reminded his congregation of the impermanence of humans’ lives on earth, concluding that the “struggles,” “tensions,” and “crises” of life left no lasting mark because in the end, the dead would be resurrected with the living by God’s powers. Gülzow reminded his congregation of the “transitoriness” of life on earth and urged them to consider their preparations for the judgment and afterlife. Gülzow argued that the only way the bereaved could see their dead loved ones again was to “bind” themselves to God through their faith. Only through faith and honoring God’s wishes could people receive comfort from him.

Reunion presented another positive appraisal of death, alongside the opportunity for renewal through God’s judgment and comfort derived from God’s power. Comfort and reunion with the dead would only come to those faithful ones who served God. These same individuals had to urgently prepare for their own death by pleasing God with their actions. Preparing for judgment and reunion left these Christians little time to dwell on the pain and hardship of bereavement.

**Moving beyond the war**

These pastors directed people’s thoughts away from the unpleasant and painful aspects death, toward a more palatable and positive appraisement of their loss.

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58 Gerhard Gülzow, sermon, 25 November 1956 (Totensonntag), Nachlaß Gerhard Gülzow, EZA 607/11, 2, 3-4.
this effort meant denying any celebration of the war and the soldiers who died. If these pastors could frame death more positively, their congregations might have less reason to feel anger or resentment at the loss of so many soldiers in battle or civilians at home. Complementing their focus on God’s power, on judgment, on new beginnings and reunion, these pastors also articulated a gradually increasing distance from the experience of war.

Heinz Kloppenburg invoked “dark memories” of the end of the First World War, the rise of the Nazis, the Kristallnacht pogrom, and the dead of the Second World War. In the same breath he also remembered the “causes of the catastrophes,” through which Germans lived. Kloppenburg encouraged his listeners to critically confront their own faith and reconcile their religion with their actions in the political sphere, in relation to the war’s memory and to 1950s threat of renewed war in Germany. In 1957 he presented God’s judgment, warning his congregation of the seriousness of contemporary issues like Third World hunger, rearmament of Germany, as well as continued European racism against Africans. Kloppenburg called for German aid to Israel, making clear the challenge for Germans to help Israel achieve peace by committing to a peaceful solution to the Palestinian question, not military action. Directing Germans’ eyes to their own judgment before God served to keep them from dwelling on their suffering and their hardship. If God was planning to scrutinize their lives and actions towards others, German congregations did not have time to feel sorry for their losses or dwell on the pain. In 1957 Gerhard Gülzow also looked to judgment, telling his congregation that

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59 Heinz Kloppenburg, sermon, 16 November 1957 (Next-to-Last Sunday of the church year), Nachlaß Heinz Kloppenburg, EZA 613/65, 1, 2-3; Ernst Wolf and Heinz Kloppenburg, eds. Christusbekenntnis im Atomzeitalter?, 8.
remembering the dead involved the dead “calling to [survivors] from their graves” to ensure their loved ones lived in such a way to ensure that they too would enter heaven.\footnote{Gerhard Gülzow, sermon, 24 November 1957 (Totensonntag), Nachlaß Gerhard Gülzow, EZA 607/11, 2-3.}

Heinrich Vogel, in a public speech in 1958, also critically employed the memory of the Second World War in order to condemn Germans’ actions and contrast the deaths of so many other peoples against Germans’ suffering. Vogel saw a special role for the Church in helping Germans work through guilt felt on the community level. His notion of the community’s guilt stretched beyond individuals’ legal responsibility, making the German people answerable to God after symbolically killing Jesus (a Jew) through the Holocaust. Forgiveness was possible in Vogel’s mind, but the magnanimity of the crime could not be elided. He also spoke of death as a new beginning. Instead of focusing the audience’s attention on the dead and their suffering, Vogel invoked the resurrection of Christians as promised in the Bible, stressing that death should be thought of in that moment as the gateway to eternal life in heaven, not a painful end to life on earth.\footnote{Clipping from \textit{Berliner Zeitung} No. 272, 21 November 1958 („Ihr sollt leben! Professor D. Vogel sprach auf dem Waldfriedhof Halbe“), Nachlaß Heinrich Vogel, EZA 665/81; Haddon Willmer, “The Justification of the Godless: Heinrich Vogel and German Guilt” in Keith Robbins, ed. Protestant Evangelism: Britain, Ireland, Germany and America c.1750-c.1950. Essays in Honour of W.R. Ward. (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1990), 332-3, 337-9.}

Heinrich Vogel too used the reunion trope to reassure grieving Germans that they would “interact with one another” as well as other faithful Christians after death. Vogel also engaged the dead’s very presence, pondering what they would tell living Germans if they could. He answered that the dead would warn the survivors to abandon “all hatred of men, fear of men and also above all … murder of men.”\footnote{Clipping from \textit{Berliner Zeitung} No. 272, 21 November 1958 („Ihr sollt leben! Professor D. Vogel sprach auf dem Waldfriedhof Halbe“), Nachlaß Heinrich Vogel, EZA 665/81.} Only by obeying the dead’s
warning could the living await their reunion together. Vogel’s emphasis on reunion likely had special resonance to his Berlin listeners. While the Berlin Wall did not yet stand, in 1958 the city’s division was maintained with deadly force. Heinrich Vogel was both a professor at the Humboldt Universität in East Berlin and at the Kirchliche Hochschule in West Berlin, leaving him “among the few people of responsibility who could go back and forth between the two parts of Germany.”

Reinforcing the prospect of a looming judgment, reunion with the dead offered a final measure of peace and consolation to those bereaved and those separated from loved ones by the division of Germany.

In 1958, Gerhard Gülzow invoked the image of an “apocalyptic Atomic age,” illustrating that the prospect of such horror had existed in New Testament times. For post-War Germans, death still led to a new beginning of “freedom of the children of God in the great ending of eternity,” not pain and sorrow. Gülzow’s own congregation could see the symbolic death of their community in Danzig as the new beginning of their lives in Lübeck. While Gülzow preached that death should allow the congregation to look past the horrors of the end of the world and toward lasting peace of God, he also preached God’s “patience” that no Christians would be denied entry into heaven because of their weak faith. He reassured listeners of God’s patience with those buried in far-off lands, those “who died at sea and on land,” and “those whose memory one would rather

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In 1959, Gülzow told his congregation that death was the process by which “the blind see and the crippled walk.” He argued that death properly understood was a “homecoming to God” for those who had died and been “redeemed” via their faith. With this insight, the congregation could see the memory of the dead as inspiration that God would one day come and “convert the prison of death into the freedom of eternity.” For this congregation, the promise of reunion and new beginning meant even those who died fighting a war of aggression and annihilation might still be received into heaven.

Professor and leading theologian Helmut Gollwitzer preached God’s power over death to his congregation in Berlin-Dahlem in 1962. He reassured his listeners that, despite the prevalence of “darkness” (death) in the world, God had always been more powerful than “darkness,” so “darkness, opposition, death and the grave” were now becoming things of the past. Gollwitzer’s very presence in West Berlin, after being held in prison by the Soviets until 1950, gave his listeners reason to believe in God’s extraordinary power over catastrophe and ultimately death. Invoking Jesus’ resurrection as evidence of God’s power, Gollwitzer told his congregation that the future return of Jesus would demonstrate this power again.

Gollwitzer’s 1962 sermon also delivered a highly critical memory of the war. He recalled the war, the aerial bombardment, hunger and abuse in concentration camps,

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64 Gerhard Gülzow, sermon, 23 November 1958 (Final Sunday of the Church year), Nachlaß Gerhard Gülzow, EZA 607/11, 4

65 Gerhard Gülzow, sermon, 22 November 1959 (Totensonntag), Nachlaß Gerhard Gülzow, EZA 607/11, 3-4.

death in the gas chambers and fearful hiding in bomb shelters. On the basis of these experiences he concluded that,

the talk of Heroes-worship, of Victims for the fatherland is false, dangerous comfort. The fallen of the war were not, as people so like to say, made victims for the fatherland. More truly must one say that they were made victims and killed through the fatherland.

To Gollwitzer, the national sorrow arose from Germany’s initiation of a war that enveloped the continent of Europe and beyond, sending Germans but many more other peoples to their graves. In his other writings, Gollwitzer sharply condemned German Protestants who chose to ignore the relationship between their faith and the problems of the world. After 1945 Christians had the opportunity to continue their beliefs and practice in a new dedication to purity and righteousness, despite the missteps of their predecessors.67 Gollwitzer saw implications for post-War West German politics in the Second World War’s memory. He wrote that Christians, “have not the choice of taking part in politics or not, but only of how to take part.” Therefore, post-War Christians should engage in a politics that seek “more togetherness, more equality, more solidarity, and …a life lived less at the cost of others, aiming continually at a life in common.” This was Germans’ challenge after war and death on so grand a scale.68 Implicitly referring to Christians’ looming judgment, Gollwitzer called Germans to a more critical memory and response to the Second World War.


68 Gollwitzer, An Introduction to Protestant Theology, 191-2, emphasis original; Helmut Gollwitzer, Vietnam, Israel und die Christenheit (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1968), 54.
A suggested memory

As pastors helped people understand death and consoled them in their grief, the Second World War largely retreated from view. Presenting congregations with notions of death as evidence of God’s power, the judgment that followed death, the new beginning and reunions promised by death diminished grounds for anger and calls for revenge among the great many bereaved. Whether confronting Germans with contemporary political questions, painful memories of the *Heimat*, or critical engagements with the war, these sermons did not allow physical or discursive room to mythologize the German soldiers’ sacrifice for the nation or to air grievances from the expulsion from the east. While many of the religious tropes overlap and were employed continuously, the place of the Second World War in these sermons changed dramatically. In 1945 pastors could explicitly recall suffering from the war but over the following decade the war’s overt mention largely disappears. After minimizing room for congregations to dwell on their pain and suffering, some pastors could then re-center attention on the war. Many now offered critical commentary, suggesting changes for German’s memories of the war.

These pastors’ suggestions for memories are consistent with the Protestant leadership’s role in radically reorganizing the observation of *Volkstrauertag* to look and feel dissimilar from memorial practices of the Third Reich. The church became a site of mourning the dead but pastors refused to allow stylized memories of heroic struggles or sacrifice in defense of the fatherland. Their efforts to direct Germans away from war are more significant considering Americans’ plans for defending Europe from expected Soviet aggression. While Americans encouraged Germans to rearm and asked former
Wehrmacht generals to provide plans for future battles, these pastors encouraged post-War Germans to become post-war Germans.

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CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

After the collapse of the Third Reich, Germans were divided in how they looked back on the Second World War to mourn those killed. The German Protestant Church was uncertain how to console its congregations and lead them in the remembering of those lost loved ones. Through the confrontation over Volkstrauertag’s observance German Protestant Church crystallized its support for a new form of an old memorial observance. Similarly, individual pastors used familiar religious tropes to minimize the space for stories of suffering and national sacrifice. Both of these interventions into Germans’ memories of the war involved critically evaluating the roles of nationalism and the military in Germany’s recent history. Both actions also required removing the military dead from any pedestal, ending any glorification of war and battle, as well as expanding memorial practices to encompass both the soldiers and the many (different) victims of the war all together.

One recent analysis of the Church’s separation of remembering the dead from remembering the dead of the war contends that this allowed for Volkstrauertag to be understood as uniquely “non-church-related.” This interpretation sees the division of dates as simply a division of duties: Totensonntag became an occasion purely for “comforting” of the bereaved, while Volkstrauertag assumed the work of “remind[ing]” the German people why these dead had died. In abstaining from any formal role in Volkstrauertag, the Protestant Church demythologized war and death, using its own
(unaffiliated) worship services on the Sunday morning of Volkstrauertag to engage in “political work towards peace.”  

This interpretation problematically separates the Church’s own guilt arising from its participation in the Third Reich and its discomfort with the continued glorification of war from its wider place in the post-war German society. Viewing the Church’s actions as an intra-institutional affair assumes that the Protestant Church desired no role in directing its congregants’ memories, electing only to take an active role in consoling them. This assumes the Church was uninterested in the formal processes of memorial observance and its role as a potential director and shaper of memories. If the Church was truly only interested in comforting the bereaved, with no intention to influence the memories and contested narratives of the war and post-War politics taking shape, why did it take such an active role in overturning the Heldengedenktag observance?

The determination of the Church to end any memorials from the Third Reich and its efforts to reframe death demonstrate the Protestant Church’s awareness of its ability to direct and give shape to memories. In denying Germans the opportunity to resurrect memory practices from the Nazi era while pastors directed Germans’ attention away from the horrors of war and the pain of death, the Protestant Church engaged in forming the memory of the war, dictating what was acceptable to say about the dead soldiers and victims. It was the church’s own realization of its earlier compliance with the formation of positive or heroic memories of earlier military struggle that led it to de-emphasize such practices after 1945.

While a desire to commemorate the fallen may suggest an incomplete disenchantment with the military itself, it also speaks to the intensity of the war’s

70 Kapust, 156-159, 169-170.
impact on every German survivor, at the immediate level of the family. Not only were soldiers dying in far-off lands, but at the war’s end also in German towns and villages. Additionally, the aerial bombing brought the war to the German people long before the Red Army took Berlin. While the populace and the new government might have preferred to simply not confront the Nazi past, the numerous bereaved insisted on mourning and public remembrance which forced them to do just that. In these arenas, a new way to regard war and soldiers gradually emerged. Forcing a rupture with older memorial practices forced the German people to recognize the larger scope of suffering wrought by the war. Directing Germans to think about death in ways meant to defuse anxieties, resentment, and hate denied a special place in memories for war or soldiers. These actions together served to orchestrate a collective memory of the Second World War that neither required nor encouraged future conflict. This transformation of commemoration helped a post-War people build a post-war nation.

71 For a periodization of the post-war disenchantment with the military and the veterans in West Germany, see Alaric Searle, Wehrmacht Generals, West German Society.
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