

The Garrison Church in Potsdam: A symbol of German militarism is being rebuilt

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The Garrison Church in Potsdam, a longstanding symbol of Prussian militarism and National Socialism, is currently being rebuilt, mainly with taxpayers' money. Despite opposition from renowned experts and a distinct lack of popular support, the church tower has now been almost fully restored. Completion of the tower is scheduled for 2024.

Built between 1730 and 1735 by order of Germany's "Soldier King" Friedrich Wilhelm I, when Potsdam was both his royal residence and his military headquarters, the baroque building was largely destroyed by a British bombing raid in 1945. In 1968 the remains of the church were blown up and demolished by the East German government. The act was entirely appropriate. There was nothing left to preserve in terms of the monument itself and the church's history is closely linked to the most reactionary traditions in Germany's history.

From the very beginning the reconstruction of the church was promoted by far-right forces and backed by arch-conservative politicians, including Brandenburg's Interior Minister Jörg Schönbohm (CDU) and Alexander Gauland, publisher of the *Märkische Allgemeine* newspaper and subsequent leader of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The Protestant state bishop, Wolfgang Huber, and the social democrat (SPD) state premiers, Manfred Stolpe and Matthias Platzeck, also backed the controversial scheme. Five years ago, Germany's President Frank-Walter Steinmeier took over patronage of the project, which was, still is and will undoubtedly remain, a place of pilgrimage for both older and a new generation of Nazis, despite all the claims to the contrary by the supporters of the plan.

The proponents of the reconstruction are organised in the "Stiftung Garrisonkirche Potsdam" (Potsdam Garrison Church Foundation) and justify the extensive building work with historical arguments that are either completely far-fetched or outright lies. They seek to glorify the church as a symbol of Prussian tolerance and enlightenment and as a source of resistance against the Nazis.

Proponents argue that the restoration of the church will revive the "historical cityscape" of Potsdam. However, this "historic cityscape" also includes a computer centre built in former East Germany prior to German reunification. The computer centre has a listed mosaic façade and functions today as creative hub for artists and cultural workers. It stands on the church grounds and would have to be demolished if the nave were to be rebuilt alongside the tower.

In reality, the supporters of the project—as was the case with the reconstruction of the Berlin City Palace and other historical buildings—are determined to revive and evoke profoundly undemocratic and authoritarian traditions. The reconstruction of historical buildings symbolising the Prussian authoritarian state and militarism is closely linked to the campaign to revive German militarism—a project that has been systematically pursued for many years.

So far, about €50 million have gone into the reconstruction of the Garrison Church, about half of this sum stemming from federal funds, money that is lacking and could be much better spent on ailing day-care

centres, schools and hospitals. Compared to the €100 billion special fund pledged by the German government for the rearmament of the Bundeswehr, the €50 million is a considerably smaller amount but serves the same purpose.

A symbol of Prussian militarism

The original Garrison Church, designed by the architect Philipp Gerlach, was built for military purposes by Friedrich Wilhelm I, who turned Potsdam into a garrison city. This is already evident from the façade adorned with weapons, which is now being reconstructed. Rather than a place of enlightenment the church was a symbol of blind loyalty and unconditional obedience to the state.

One of the leading critics of the reconstruction project, Philipp Oswalt, professor of architectural theory, pointed out in *Die Zeit* newspaper on July 24 that the church had "always been the symbolic building of Prussian militarism":

"In addition to the several wars waged by Frederick the Great, the church also provided its blessing to Germany's colonial wars as well as the First and Second World Wars. In 1910, a memorial plaque was dedicated to the German perpetrators of the genocide against the Herero and Nama tribes in Africa. Priests at the church preached nationalist and bellicose ideas and celebrated the suppression of the revolutions of 1848 and 1918/19. WWI General Erich Ludendorff sounded the attack on democracy in the Garrison Church as early as November 1919. The church thus became a place of identification for anti-democratic and radical right-wing forces in the Weimar Republic."

In particular, the church became a place of warmongering and the glorification of war after the founding of the German Empire in 1871. Up until 1918, soldiers were sworn to unconditional obedience to the king and emperor at the church. The soldiers who perpetrated the genocide in what is now Namibia and who put down the Boxer Rebellion in China were blessed in the Garrison Church.

In the summer of 1900, local priest Johannes Kessler proclaimed to soldiers marching out to China: "The thousand-year struggle between the Orient and the Occident has begun once again. You are fighters for God and cannot rest until his holy word applies for all peoples!"

In November 1913, at an oath of allegiance, court preacher Walter Richter cheered on soldiers, declaring: "Mowed down the ranks of the faithful and the next line is already rushing in—up—and through. What do we care about the mounds of our corpses. ... Return, return my people, to this spirit of sacrifice if you want to proceed—and you will stand not at the end, but rather at the beginning of your world's seeding."

During this period, the Garrison Church was a centre of pilgrimage for reactionary figures seeking to eliminate the Weimar Republic. Numerous

celebrations by Stahlhelm troops, the German National People's Party, the Bismarck Youth, the Reich Warriors' League Kyffhäuser and the All-German Association took place at the church.

Based on years of archival research, journalist Matthias Grüning published the book *Für Deutschtum und Vaterland* (For Germanness and Fatherland) dealing with the history of the Garrison Church in the 20th century. In his book Grüning relates these events.

The absolute nadir in the history of the church was the so-called "Day of Potsdam" on March 21, 1933—the day upon which the Nazi dictatorship was symbolically enthroned. Following the Reichstag fire, Hitler chose the Garrison Church as an alternative location for the opening of the Reichstag. Otto Dibelius, the General Superintendent of the Protestant church, delivered a euphoric sermon. Alongside Hitler and his entire cabinet, both Reich President Paul von Hindenburg and Crown Prince Wilhelm took part in the act of state.

The symbolic handshake between Hitler and Hindenburg was reproduced millions of times by the Nazi regime on coins, postcards, souvenirs and devotional objects. The Garrison Church developed into a sacred site, a central feature of the political cult of the Nazi regime. Festive and consecration events were held there and numerous supporters of the regime made pilgrimages to the church.

A far-right campaign

The campaign for the reconstruction of the Garrison Church began among far-right circles in West Germany long before the end of the GDR. In 1984, Max Klaar, a lieutenant colonel in the Bundeswehr, founded the "Traditionsgemeinschaft Potsdamer Glockenspiel" in Iserlohn, to collect donations for the rebuilding of the Garrison Church bells.

Many donations came from former Wehrmacht soldiers who protested against the Bundeswehr's Tradition Decree of 1982 in this way. The decree officially named for the first time the Wehrmacht's culpable involvement in the National Socialist regime.

In 1987, the Traditionsgemeinschaft achieved its first goal and set up a replica of the Garrison bells in a Bundeswehr barracks in Iserlohn. The bells destroyed during the war also included four bells with right-wing extremist and militaristic inscriptions that had been installed in the church tower in May 1939. Hitler had personally approved one of the bells' inscriptions. An enthusiastic report on the inauguration of the bells in the presence of local NSDAP bigwigs appeared at the time in the Nazi newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*.

After the reunification of Germany in 1990, the Traditionsgemeinschaft donated the set of bells, known as a carillon, to the city of Potsdam, which installed them on Plantagenplatz. The bells were inaugurated in front of 10,000 guests by state Premier Manfred Stolpe (SPD). Ever since the carillon has played the chorale "Praise the Lord" every hour and "Always be faithful and honest" every half hour. It was only silenced in 2019, after a number of renowned historians and cultural figures called for its demolition.

Lieutenant Colonel Klaar, whose radical right-wing views were already beyond doubt at that time, now dedicated himself to the reconstruction of the Garrison Church and solicited large donations from like-minded people. In March 1990, he gave a speech at the CDU state party conference in Brandenburg. In June 1990, he received support from New Forum, the political party formed in the months before the collapse of the Stalinist East German regime, which organised an event to recall the demolition of the Garrison Church. In October 1990, Potsdam council decided to restore the city's historic cityscape with a view of the three churches, thus paving the way for the church's reconstruction.

Gradually, the initial reluctance on the part of the Protestant church subsided. After a meeting with Klaar, Wolfgang Huber, the state bishop, in particular, came out in favour of the reconstruction. The newspapers *Bild*, *FAZ* and *Märkische Allgemeine* (edited by Alexander Gauland from 1991 to 2005) all promoted the plan. By 2000, the Traditionsgemeinschaft had raised over €2 million, according to its own account, and promised to finance the construction in full.

In 2004, the "Appeal from Potsdam" was issued, outlining the programmatic guideline for the reconstruction of the Garrison Church. Among the first signatories were state Premier Matthias Platzeck (SPD), Alexander Gauland, Jörg Schönbohm and Bishop Huber.

The document is "characterised by the arguments of the New Far Right." This was the conclusion reached by the scientific advisory board of the "Garrison Church Learning Site" after extensive research in the summer of 2022. According to the site, the "Appeal from Potsdam" shows in alarming fashion the extent to which far-right extremists in Potsdam have succeeded in infiltrating Germany's political centre ground, spreading historical misrepresentations and the types of arguments associated with radical new-right circles.

The academic advisory board of the "Garrison Church Learning Site," which has critically examined the reconstruction project, includes more than a dozen university professors. The chairman is Professor Micha Brumlik.

Back in 2019, more than a hundred artists, architects, monument conservators, scientists, church representatives and cultural workers signed an open letter rejecting the "Appeal from Potsdam" and demanding an end to the reconstruction. "There is a continuity here from the Prussian military to far-right radicalism in the Weimar Republic, National Socialism and the radicalism of the new right." they wrote—but their letter fell on deaf ears.

A national project of great political significance

Under conditions of a resurgence of German claims to leadership and German militarism, the proponents of reconstruction have ultimately prevailed. There was hardly any support for the project on the part of the public.

Deutschlandfunk radio has cited a number of citizens: "An attempt is being made here to change history, to reinterpret it, and that is one reason why many citizens, including Christians in the city, have expressly opposed it." Also, "I notice in Potsdam that people are leaving the church because of the Garrison Church. And that's why I'm calling for a halt to its construction."

In the event, due to a lack of donations, considerable public financing was required. The federal government coughed up €25 million, and additional federal and state funds are required to complete the tower. In 2017, the total cost was estimated at around €100 million with only €6 million raised in public donations, while the Protestant church contributed €5 million.

Since Col. Klaar made no bones about his radical right-wing views, the state, city and church leaders felt obliged to gradually distance themselves from him. This does not alter the fact that Klaar and his reactionary nostrums continue to have a decisive influence on the building today. For example, he has exerted strong pressure on the "Society for the Reconstruction of the Garrison Church," which is pressing ahead with the project.

Colonel Burkhard Franck, Klaar's closest comrade-in-arms in the Traditionsgemeinschaft, whom he has known since they trained together in the Bundeswehr in the 1960s, was elected to the board of the society

and headed it from 2012. He was replaced in 2015 after praising in an essay the “unprecedented organisational performance of the Wehrmacht in the preparation, implementation and continuation of mobilisation to the extreme.”

Klaar himself, who had transferred the assets of the Traditionsgemeinschaft to the “Stiftung Preussisches Kulturerbe” (not to be confused with the state-owned “Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz”) in 2006, only withdrew from the Garrison Church project in 2015, having once again spouted out his reactionary and anti-Semitic views.

“What the victors did to our state and the German people after its unconditional surrender is simply perverse,” he wrote in a brochure marking his departure. He also condemned the decision, taken after long hesitation, to include some critical elements in the reconstruction project, with the anti-Semitic remark: “Whoever wants to erect a place of repentance to confess German guilt is following Mosaic teachings.”

No longer able to deny the historical role of the Garrison Church, despite all their euphemisms, proponents of the project proclaimed the concept of a “learning place of history,” seeking to propagandise their narrative that the church was a victim of National Socialism, allied bombing and the “unjust state” of East Germany.

To this end, their first project was an online exhibition, with a knowledge repository and simulation game, dealing only with the period from 1945 to 1968, i.e., from the bombing by the Allies to the demolition of the church by the GDR regime. One looks in vain for any critical reappraisal of the history of the church in the German Reich and under the Nazis. This information can be found on the website run by Oswalt and other opponents of the scheme: <http://lernort-garnisonkirche.de/>.

Regardless of the efforts to mitigate opposition to the reconstruction by including a few critical footnotes, the rebuilt church tower remains a symbol of militarism and National Socialism. It stands for the revival of the Prussian and German national synthesis of church, state and military, which the National Socialists seamlessly adopted. Neo-Nazis and AfD politicians will use it as a place of pilgrimage, as they already do in the case of the Kyffhäuser monument and other historical sites. The ex-AfD politician Andreas Kalbitz and the right-wing blogger Billy Six are already using the church for their own purposes.

This is all by design. The assumption of patronage by the German president and the funding of the immense construction costs by the German government makes clear that this is a national project of great political importance. The efforts to once again make Germany the “leading European power” and a major military player require a revision of history and the downplaying of the historical crimes of German imperialism.

The links between official political circles and right-wing extremism are very apparent. The “Citizens of the Reich,” who were recently revealed to be preparing an armed coup, also dream of former Prussian supremacy and the restoration of the Reich within the borders of 1937. They, too, have deep roots in the Germany army and will be ecstatic about the reconstruction of the Garrison Church.



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