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Wewelsburg Castle – an attraction pole of Dark Tourism – How to deal with this phenomenon at a memorial site

Before beginning with the field of tension that is the myth of Wewelsburg – Dark Tourism and its responses, I would first like to explain the history of the Wewelsburg in the Third Reich.

About the history of the Wewelsburg

The Renaissance castle was built at the beginning of the 17th century as a second official residence for the Paderborn prince-bishops. The triangular form is due to its position on the peak of a spur above the Alme valley. Due to secularisation of the Paderborn bishopric in 1802, ownership of the castle was transferred to the Prussian state. The Wewelsburg then only served as a storage hall for grain duties and as living quarters for the bursary officer and catholic priest. The former district of Büren took over the building in the 1920s from the state property administration. Influenced by the Catholic youth and homeland movement, the district authorities expanded the castle to become a centre of culture with a youth hostel, homeland museum and conference location.¹

In the early 1930s, Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler was searching for a site for an own SS Reichsführer school in the Lippe Westphalia region, and he saw Westphalia Lippe to be the Saxon heartland of Germania, the alleged home country of the "Arian northern race". Himmler began to rent the castle from June 1934 onwards. Instead of training operations, the head of the castle garrison Manfred von Knobelsdorff initially set up scientific research activities. His colleagues were convinced of racial nationalism and the blood and soil ideology. Himmler added to the furnishings of his "Westphalian castle" many works of art and paintings with historical, Germanic-mythological themes, aiming to emphasise the location's uncompromising claim to be an elitist, traditionally-oriented place of assembly. Brigadeführer Siegfried Taubert became the new castellan in 1938 but did not pursue academic, racial interests.

¹ Wulff E. Brebeck: Die Wewelsburg. Geschichte und Bauwerk im Überblick, München, Berlin 2005.

Himmler together with his architect Hermann Bartels drove forward the architectural development of the castle complex, their primary interest being the expansion of the Wewelsburg to become an exclusive place of assembly for top-ranking SS generals. Concentration camp inmates had been used for this expansion since 1939, taken from the concentration camp in Wewelsburg that was set up for this purpose. At least 1,285 prisoners died due to inhumane living and working conditions in Wewelsburg.² The North tower was included in the expansion programme from 1939 as well. For the crypt, concentration camp inmates had to excavate the floor of the cellar level with great difficulty. The round cupola ceiling was cast from concrete and encased in quarry stone from the nearby quarry to give the impression of a Mycenaean domed tomb, and the floor consists of dark stone slabs of Anröchte limestone set on the rocks. A circular basin was worked into the floor into which two gas pipes emerge – these presumably were supposed to ignite a gas flame. The so-called "SS Obergruppenführersaal" was created on the ground floor, and Bartels had twelve columns erected in the round hall. No written records exist recording role models for the design of the Obergruppenführersaal. Architectural correlations certainly exist though with the earlier Baroque prince-bishop chapel at the same location that also had twelve columns. The design of the hall focuses on the centre of the marble floor into which a sun wheel motif of dark green stone was worked. A certain analogy to Wagner's stage performances is definitely permissible, for example to Parsifal's Gralsburg, but there are no written sources to confirm this. From the outbreak of the war onwards, Himmler's growth in power was also reflected in the large-scale plans, which also took into account the complete rebuilding of the existing village. In the designs, the Wewelsburg together with the North tower forms the centre of the complete complex, the "centre of the world", surrounded by a concentrically designed building complex intersected by a wide road leading up to the Wewelsburg.

Wewelsburg – a location of personal affirmation for the SS

Himmler visited Wewelsburg at least 25 times, often being accompanied by high-ranking SS officers and personalities. An important meeting of section commanders took place from 12 to 15 June 1941. In its special importance for the SS officers it reflected the ideas of Himmler in particular – the SS elite came together at this place

² Kirsten John[-Stucke]: „Mein Vater wird gesucht...“ Häftlinge des Konzentrationslagers in Wewelsburg, 4. Auflage Essen 2001 (Historische Schriften des Kreismuseums Wewelsburg Band 2).

of assembly exclusively set up for them just a few days before the attack on the Soviet Union to gain consciousness of their ideological position as the "Aryan elite". The reconstructed castle complex provided precisely the desired atmosphere of a defiant Westphalian castle with cosy evenings in front of the fire.³

Himmler had the Wewelsburg blown up before the arrival of the American troops on 2 April 1945 and a large portion of the art treasures were concealed by the concentration camp prisoners. After the SS officers fled, residents from the village and surroundings looted the castle. A day later, fire once again flared up and the castle burnt down to its outer walls. In the Nazi era, the Wewelsburg was no mystical site but part of scientific operations, the criminal system of SS domination and the brutal machinery of persecution.⁴

After 1945 – parallel lines of development

The SS past of the castle was largely suppressed in the public sphere in the first decades following the end of the war, and an early memorial by the artist Jo Glahé set up in 1950 in the crypt was largely ignored. Further attempts to recall the victims of SS violence with commemorative plaques or memorial stones failed. It was only in the mid-1970s that public discussion began concerning an appropriate method of remembrance. The district of Paderborn eventually decided to set up a documentation and memorial centre. This was inaugurated in 1982 in the former SS guardhouse, and since that time the Wewelsburg District Museum has been undertaking active memorial site work. A commemorative marker was set up in 2000 on the former roll-call grounds of the concentration camp due to the commitment of young Wewelsburg residents. This initiative then created the association Gedenktag 2. April in Wewelsburg – Verein wider das Vergessen und für Demokratie e. V. ("Memorial Day 2 April at Wewelsburg – Association against Forgetting and for Democracy"). This association and the District Museum gather on the anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camp to conduct commemoration ceremonies for

³ Markus Moors: Die SS und die Wewelsburg – Heinrich Himmlers ideales Machtmodell, in: Heinrich Himmlers Taschenkalender 1940, kommentierte Edition, hg. v. Markus Moors, Moritz Pfeiffer, Paderborn 2013 (Schriftenreihe des Kreismuseums Wewelsburg Band 9), S. 55-88.

⁴ S. auch Die SS, Himmler und die Wewelsburg, hg.v. Jan Erik Schulte, Paderborn 2009 (Schriftenreihe des Kreismuseums Wewelsburg Band 7).

the victims of SS violence in the Wewelsburg.⁵ This line of development is the one side of handling SS history at the Wewelsburg, reflecting enlightenment and the memory of the victims as well as historical-political education.

Already in the 1950s though, the crypto-historical realm of legend concerning the Wewelsburg began to emerge due to the reminiscences of former members of the SS. The memoirs of Walter Schellenberg must be mentioned here in particular who was the former head of foreign intelligence services in the Reich Security Head Office of the SS, as well as a particular publication by the journalist Willi Frischauer who based his work on recollections from Karl Wolff, Himmler's personal adjutant. Both represent Himmler as an unsure and somewhat strange person and the SS as a secret order. In their narrations, the Wewelsburg became a type of secluded SS cloister. Set pieces taken from these tales crop up in the next years not only in popular journals but also in serious literature (e.g. Heinz Höhne: "Der Orden unter dem Totenkopf", 1967). Furnishings such as coats of arms and heavy oak furniture from the Wewelsburg supported the myth that Himmler wanted to assemble a round table in the Wewelsburg, akin to King Arthur and his twelve knights. The truth of initially oral traditions could not be refuted by written sources, and for this reason these early recordings of experiences and imaginative tales from former members of the SS continue to influence literature up until the present time.

Such narrations usually still focus on the North tower, interpreted as being a secret "cult site of the SS", although no ritual acts by the SS can be verified. Against all enlightening research, both rooms are deemed to be characterised by a special aura and radiance. Esoterics and geomancers attempt with pendulums, magnetic probes and measuring devices to investigate the substructure of the tower for secret, subterranean rooms.ⁱ The Wewelsburg is seen to be a special site for natural energy in esoteric circles, and it is conspicuous that right-wing esoteric circles give especial importance to the Wewelsburg in connection with the supposedly secret insiders of the SS elite.

The Wewelsburg has a particularly difficult role due to its esoteric reception in "Satanist" groups. Michael A. Aquino must be mentioned in particular in this

⁵ Wulff E. Brebeck: Von langer Dauer. Zum Streit um ein Mahnmal für die NS-Opfer in Wewelsburg seit 1945, in: Dörfliche Gesellschaft und ländliche Siedlung. Lippe und Das Hochstift Paderborn in überregionaler Perspektive, hg. v. Uta Halle, Frank Huismann, Roland Linde, Bielefeld 2001, S. 281-325.

connection, who in his position as high priest of the Temple of Set carried out meditation in the crypt in the beginning of the 1980s, publishing this as the "Wewelsburg Working". Further satanic organisations such as the Church of Satan, the Black Order of Lucifer and the Circle of Hagalaz have all been attracted to the Wewelsburg and its SS past in the last decades.

Conspiracy theories that glorify the SS as a secret order are also frequently referenced by German and English-language popular documentary films (e.g. by the BBC, National Geographic Channel and History Channel). It borders on the limit of tolerance when a narrator in the guise of Indiana Jones with leather jacket and floppy hat is on the trail of supposed secrets or hideaways for the Holy Grail or Holy Lance, only to find out that in the end nothing can be verified. This theme of conspiracy can now also be found in innumerable thrillers, and the various plots frequently centre on the SS and its follow-up organisations as secret lodges who aimed to use the Wewelsburg as a "ritual location of storage" for their secret knowledge.

Since the 1990s the extreme right political scene in Germany has focused on the Obergruppenführersaal with its inlay depicting a sun wheel. The theme of a sun wheel, going under the name of "black sun", became a mark of identification for like-minded political groups in the following years. In contrast to the swastika, the sun wheel design is not a forbidden, anti-constitutional emblem because it was not invented by the SS and had no particular function in the Third Reich. Many right-wing organizations now base their emblems or logos on the design of the "black sun". The right-wing music scene often uses myths concerning the Wewelsburg and the "black sun" in song texts and on CD covers, and computer games and comics are keen to reference conspiracy myths about the SS and their successors, adopting the Wewelsburg as the location for action. The latest development is purposefully using the design as an emblem of recognition for neo-nazis in crime thrillers or for mad space nazis such as in the cine film Iron Sky.

Based on these different receptions, visitors come to the Wewelsburg and memorial centre with various expectations, and they project their ideas onto the historical site. The legends popular since the end of the war usually lead to a veiling of the criminal character of the SS, and in this way the Wewelsburg has become an icon of everyday culture within the atmosphere of neo-nazism, esoterism and the occult. At

the same time though and due to "positive commemoration", the location has become a renowned memorial and extracurricular learning site.⁶

Visitor structure

We must now take a look at the visitor structure – who comes to visit this controversial and diverse historical place of learning?

The largest visitor group to the commemorative and memorial site has always been individual grown-up visitors, passing through the exhibition without professional guidance. This confirms the decision to equip the exhibition redesigned in 2010 with multi-faceted, self-reflecting communication and media methods that can be suitably used by single visitors.

Visitors not only come from the surrounding region but from all over Germany. The high number of foreign visitor groups is explained by the many relatives and dependants of the British Army stationed in the region. The foreign visitors originate mainly from Great Britain, the Netherlands, other adjacent European countries and the USA. The high awareness level of the Wewelsburg with English-speaking visitors is because of the significant recognition of the SS as a "soldierly order" and of course due to the high impact of popular TV documentations.

Concerning motivation of the groups, a rough differentiation can be made between "compulsory visitors" and voluntary visitor groups. "Compulsory visitors" include pupils, police, judiciary personnel and soldiers carrying out visits to memorial centres as part of the publicly organised educational system. Age-appropriate educational programs are particularly offered for school pupil groups.

"Voluntary" visitors include people participating in so-called history and culture tourism aiming to achieve a greater understanding of historical events and wishing to pay tribute to the victims of the Nazi regime. These include youth organisations, parties, associations, homeland and history associations, sports clubs, teacher groups and private circles of friends. Even birthday outings with people interested in history visit the new exhibition. Teachers, lecturers and students select the educational facilities of the Wewelsburg location, and companies, schools and

⁶ Mythos Wewelsburg. Fakten und Legenden, hg. von Kirsten John-Stucke, Daniela Siepe (Schriftenreihe des Kreismuseums Wewelsburg Band 10), Paderborn 2015.

universities use the memorial site as the destination for their excursions with an educational purpose. Survivors of the concentration camp and their relatives visit the memorial centre as part of "memorial pilgrimages". Visits by these people are characterised especially by their personal involvement and consternation. This form of "memorial tourism" focuses on remembering the victims of SS violence, and all of these groups are important for actively addressing National Socialism and commemoration of the victims of SS violence. Visits to the memorial often end on the former roll-call ground where flowers are laid to commemorate the victims of SS violence.⁷

Conversely, the location is also sought out by groups that visit the Wewelsburg merely due to their fascination with the order of the SS and their criminal activities. These sometimes include revisionists and neo-nazis coming to the Wewelsburg to feel the supposed "aura" of an "SS cult site". Visiting the Wewelsburg serves as an occasion for such people to relativise or deny the crimes of the Nazis. Such visitors do not reflect on the themes of the exhibition and are mainly interested in the shared group experience when seeing the "black sun" as they call it, the sun wheel in the North tower. There are also groups of visitors that do not profess far-right aims but wish to establish their esoteric theories based on right-wing philosophy and want to verify right-wing conspiracy theories. Also not to be underestimated are visitors interested in militaria and all historical sites of World War II.⁸

As well as individual visitors interested in culture and history, many holidaymakers and spa guests also select the Wewelsburg as a tourist destination. Cycle tourists, motorcyclists and hikers come on the weekends in summer. Tourist visitors often only find out about the Nazi past of the castle on-site and about the facilities on offer at the memorial centre. An important tourist-related aspect is surely the youth hostel located in the Wewelsburg together with the Historical Museum of the Prince Bishopric of Paderborn which is the regional, historical permanent exhibition of the District Museum. A large part of the tourist visitors, consisting mainly of families with children,

⁷ Brebeck, Wulff E.: Gedenkstätten für NS-Opfer und Tourismus – eine Erkundung, in: Kulturvermittlung und Tourismus: Ethik versus Wirtschaftlichkeit, Tagungsbericht des Internationalen Bodensee-Symposiums ICOM, 2009, S. 66-73.

⁸ Marc Terrance: Concentration Camps. A Travelor's Guide to World War II Sites, Parkland 1999; vgl. Wulff E. Brebeck: Gedenkstätten für NS-Opfer und Tourismus – eine Erkundung, S. 66-73.

do not visit the memorial centre but go to the regional historical department that offers a special museum-educational program for families and children.

How does the District Museum deal with this phenomenon? A summary

The "Wewelsburg Commemorative and Memorial Centre 1933 – 1945" sees itself as an extracurricular place of learning offering extensive educational seminar programs for groups of young people and grown-ups. In addition to the historical-political work with regard to education and elucidation, the commemorative character of the exhibition is also important. As the only concentration camp memorial site in the German federal state of North Rhine Westphalia, the victims of Niederhagen concentration camp are commemorated and contact to survivors and relatives of concentration camp victims is cultivated. The commemorative and memorial centre is a place of research for the history of the SS, the Niederhagen concentration camp and its prisoners, and an archival collection, prisoner database and library can be used by interested visitors, students and scientists. With its multifaceted programme of educational activities and events the commemorative and memorial centre has the task of responding to various visitor groups and binding visitors to the museum for as long as possible.

However, the disturbing popularity of the Wewelsburg and the forms of reception that belittle the crimes of the SS are a challenge that must be constantly faced by the District Museum.

With the redesign of the commemorative and memorial centre in 2010, the two historic rooms in the North tower were purposefully integrated into the general visitor tour, even though the SS architecture of authority and its Nazi symbolism appears to exert a special form of attraction for certain parties. Placing coloured bean bags on the sun wheel in the Obergruppenführersaal and hanging reproductions of the early memorial cycle by Josef Glahé in the crypt have however managed to prevent any proximity to an apparent "overpowering aura" in these rooms. This is in fact repeatedly verified by angry responses from extremists in right-wing internet forums who believe the supposed cult rooms have been "desecrated".⁹

⁹ Kirsten John-Stucke: Genese, konzeptionelle Grundsätze und Gliederung der Ausstellung „Ideologie und Terror der SS“, in: Endzeitkämpfer, hg. v. Wulff E. Brebeck, Frank Huismann, Kirsten John-Stucke, Jörg Piron, München, Berlin 2011 (Schriftenreihe des Kreismuseums Wewelsburg Band 8).

The legacies of the SS are not hidden in the exhibition but purposefully presented in their original state. They are indeed displayed and analysed in their inhuman associations, and the curiosity of visitors concerning the mentality of the SS is seen as an occasion to be enlightened about their criminal ideology. Politically mature visitors are focused on in this respect. Any possible fascination of visitors for crimes and death at this site is not supported in the presentation of the history. The neutral, deconstructive display of objects and history is an important principle both for the exhibition itself and for visitor support and guidance. Many educational programs serve to heighten the perception of visitors for symbols and marks with inhuman backgrounds, and also attempt to identify strategies for definitively counteracting such attitudes.¹⁰

A special house regulation has been put into practice in the District Museum for the past 10 years. This forbids not only unconstitutional symbols and gestures on the grounds of the District Museum but also forbids the wearing and showing of symbols that have a definite reference to the right-wing scene. The problem of right-wing extremism cannot be solved in this way, but an example can be set demonstrating that the museum is clearly active against extreme right-wing views and for the personal dignity of the victims.¹¹

A last word about a particular type of visitor that we deny admission to – these are the ghost hunters wanting to carry out analyses with night vision cameras during the night at the Wewelsburg, hoping to discover paranormal phenomena or ghosts. This form of sensationalism and spirit of adventure is not supported in any way.

¹⁰ Kirsten John-Stucke, Heiko Klare, Stefan Wunsch: Zwischen „Mystifizierung“ und „Authentizität“. Überlegungen zum Umgang mit der extremen Rechten an sogenannten Täterorten, in: „Opa war in Ordnung“. Erinnerungspolitik der extremen Rechten, hg. v. Hans Peter Killguss, Martin Langebach, Köln 2016.

¹¹ Kirsten John-Stucke: Wewelsburg. Ein Landkreis wehrt sich gegen Geschichtsverklärung, in: Wider die Gleichgültigkeit! Aktiv gegen Rechtsextremismus: Perspektiven, Projekte, Tipps, hg. v. Julia Haase, Gregor Rosenthal, Berlin 2013, S. 100-108.