

Neil Gregor: When the Nazis returned to Nuremberg: The Party Rally Grounds and the NPD in the 1960s



The Zeppelin Grandstand and Nuremberg's long-serving lord mayor Dr. Andreas Urschlechter
(collage: *rijo*)

Pragmatism, a consensus in favour of silence and historical conscientiousness

If one issue has come to symbolise for critically-minded observers the allegedly amnesic qualities of the memory culture of the city prior to the 1980s it has undoubtedly been the supposed failure of the city authorities to acknowledge the historically-loaded and ethically-charged nature of the former Nazi party rally grounds. For critics on the Left, in particular, the myopic pragmatism which governed all attempts to find a purposeful use for the archaeological and architectural relics of the Nazi regime up to that point was symptomatic of a wider culture of denial whose primary characteristic was one of repression. Such critiques have typically been embedded in a wider polemic against the memory cultures of the Federal Republic which customarily connects both the restorative qualities of the political culture of the immediate post-war years and the massive material transformations of the “economic miracle” to a widespread consensus in favour of silence regarding the crimes of the recent past which has only been meaningfully punctured in more recent decades.

Much, indeed, speaks for seeing the issue in this way. As many previous commentators have demonstrated in a long series of publications on the problematic associations of the city with Nazism, one searches in vain in the records of the city council for historically-informed dis-

cussions of what to do with the former party rally grounds - the council's deliberations in the 1950s and 1960s were always informed, rather, by questions of economic expediency and commercial utility. The moral responsibility mayor Andreas Urschlechter had in mind when discussing plans to turn the incomplete Congress Hall into some kind of a conference centre in the late 1950s, for example, was not to the murdered victims of fascism, but to the local taxpayer, in whose interests he wished to raise the city's profile as a tourist and conference destination.



Relics of the Congress Hall at Dutzendteich pond
(photo: Susanne Rieger)

Moreover, if practical necessity had governed the usage of the various disparate elements of the site in the late 1940s and 1950s - the need to hold incarcerated former party activists, the need to find much-needed accommodation for thousands of refugees and expellees - it is also very clear that the gradual process of erasure to which this gave rise was far from unwelcome among the city authorities charged with dealing with the site. When he reflected on the transformation of the various elements of the party rally grounds by 1958 the then head of the city's construction office, Heinz Schmeißner, opined that "it is a pleasing fact that we have been able to lay out the large open area as a public park; the last remains of the Luitpoldarena are being removed; the excavation pit has disappeared, for which we have the Silbersee. The towers of the Märzfeld will have to give way to the commuter town of Langwasser".

If the management of the material relics themselves is taken as the indicator of the evolving sensibilities of the city council, then even by the mid-1960s there were few signs that a new awareness of the historical significance of the site was emerging. The Zeppelintribüne was partly dismantled in 1967; similarly, in 1966 and 1967 eleven colossal square towers on the

Märzfeld were demolished to make way for ongoing residential construction in the new satellite suburb of Langwasser. Even as the cumulative impact of the Ulm, Eichmann, and Auschwitz murder trials were gradually forcing the emergence of a new culture of contemplation and reflection, the museal and pedagogic possibilities - and obligations - embodied in the former party rally grounds were not, apparently contemplated. Indeed, it was not until the remaining relics of the rally grounds were given protected monument status by the Bavarian government in 1973 that the city council was forced to begin slowly reflecting upon the historical and moral dimensions of the challenge posed by these crumbling structures and the spaces in-between.

Nonetheless, there are good grounds for suggesting that the blanket charge of repression sells short the complexities of the issue. For one thing, measuring the pragmatic choices made by the first generation of post-war civic leaders by the yardsticks of today may, in some respects, be legitimate - a gentle but firm moral critique of the shortcomings of the memory culture of the 1950s and 1960s remains central to any engagement with this problem from the standpoint of the present - but it does little justice to the enormous practical pressures under which civic leaders operated in the post-war years. Given the destruction bequeathed by the war it is little surprise that the city fathers sought to make use of whatever material resources were available - the dictates of crisis management, not the obligations of moral reflection, shaped the usage of barracks previously used to house forced workers as refugee accommodation; shortages of alternative space, not absent moral reflex, explain the usage of the Congress Hall as an exhibition or storage space in the late 1940s. The pragmatic choices pursued by the first post-war generation of Social Democratic leaders reflected the privileging of welfarist agendas by a political tradition historically focussed on alleviating hardship - and given the scale of the post-war crisis it is hardly surprising that this was the case. For all that the “economic miracle” brought a swift return of prosperity to many, overcoming the destructive material legacies of the war took a full twenty years. Without a historically-informed understanding of the depth of the welfare crisis experienced by the city and its inhabitants in the first ten or so years after the war critiques of the shortcomings of post-war decisions quickly take on the character of a simplistic, and correspondingly tiresome, polemic.



Detail from the Zepplin Grandstand
(photo: Susanne Rieger)

In any case, charting the city's handling of the physical relics of the Nazi regime from its early pragmatic responses to material crisis to its later engagement in initiatives driven by pedagogy provides at best a partial account of the dynamic which governed *Vergangenheitspolitik* in the city. Above all, to see in these developments simply a microcosm of the evolving relationship of the Federal Republic to the challenges of the Nazi past does not do adequate justice to the peculiarities of the local political culture in the city, which, for all its awkward historic associations with the Nazi regime, was shaped most powerfully by the dominant presence of the Social Democratic tradition. In Nuremberg, the limitations of a wider confrontation of the past in the 1950s and 1960s reflected, arguably, not the repressive proclivities of a city leadership who wished to connive in the 'denial' of the crimes of Nazism: it bears repeating that many of the first generation of post-war Social Democratic politicians in this city and others had experienced Nazi terror on their own bodies - mayor Julius Lossmann had spent much time in Dachau, for example. They had as good a reason as anybody to wish for a confrontation of the crimes of the past.

If they did not talk as openly or critically of the Nazi era as one might, from the perspective of today, expect, it is because they were acutely aware of the need for conciliation across the divided political traditions of the city in the wake of the violence and conflict of the previous epoch: a certain degree of circumspection was necessary if the nationalist-inclined bourgeois-

sie - the historic backbone of fascism - was to be reintegrated into a functioning, democratic civil society. In other words, the silences of the 1950s and 1960s did not reflect absent awareness of the crimes of the past - they contained knowledge, a knowledge whose articulation, however, would shatter the fragile civic peace reforged between competing political traditions which had stood in a relationship of fratricidal violence down to 1933 and through the Nazi years. Establishing and safeguarding democracy was, initially, more important than a confrontational memory politics - indeed, in many respects the two were incompatible in the first two decades or so after the war.

Reactions to the emergence of the NPD in Nuremberg since 1966

In any case, the strongly democratic reflexes of the Social Democratic party were, themselves, born of a powerful memory of the experience and presence of fascism in the city before 1945. This is shown, most obviously, by a little described episode in the history of Nuremberg - the emergence of the NPD in the mid-1960s. In the March 1966 local elections the NPD won 3 seats on the city council. At least one of its councillors, Eberhard Engelhardt, had a long history of moving in extreme rightwing circles - in 1952 he had acted as a lawyer in defence of the neo-Nazi Socialist Reich Party. This was followed by further success in the Bavarian state elections of November 1966 - here the party not only gained 7.4 per cent of the vote across the state, but 13.1 per cent in Nuremberg in particular.



(collage: *rijo*)

Within the mainstream democratic parties on the city council there was a strong consensus on the need to resist the influence of the NPD and its provocative activities in the city. Following the local elections of 1966 the SPD, FDP and CSU all announced their refusal to engage in

any form of political cooperation with the party. When the new council was convened, they immediately activated a mechanism in the council's statutes which permitted the reduction of membership of the council's committees from 15 to 13. As a result, the NPD was denied the one representative on each committee to which it would otherwise have been entitled. While the main parties insisted that this move was based purely on the realisation, gained through practical experience, that larger committees were too impractical to achieve results, it was transparently obvious that this was a politically motivated decision aimed at keeping NPD influence on the affairs of the city to a minimum.

Much more problematic for the democratic powerholders on the city council was the issue of the NPD's symbolic appropriation of the city as a site for its gatherings. Both the historic associations of the Hauptmarkt - previously the Adolf-Hitler-Platz - and the former rally grounds themselves posed an acute problem for the city. The NPD repeatedly engaged in the symbolic occupation of Nuremberg's historically-charged spaces in a manner which provocatively implied that it saw itself as standing in a direct continuum with the NSDAP. On three occasions from 1966 to 1968 the NPD held mass gatherings in the Messehalle; during the election campaigns of 1966 it mounted demonstrations on the Hauptmarkt; in renting the new Meistersingerhalle for a mass gathering in 1965 it was consciously holding a meeting on the terrain of the original Nazi party rallies, within throwing distance of the Luitpoldhain memorial and in sight of the Congress Hall.



„Goldener Saal“ (Golden Hall) inside Zeppelin Grandstand
(photo: Susanne Rieger)

From within civil society protest was led by a broad coalition of the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition (APO), the trades unions and former victims of fascism. In the case of the former, this protest against neo-fascist potentials coagulated with a broader critique of perceived authoritarian continuities embodied, most obviously, in the “Great Coalition” federal government of CDU and SPD and in the proposed Emergency Laws, which were regarded by many in the mid- and late-1960s as an assault on democracy reminiscent of 1933. The student element of the APO mounted a series of protests against the NPD’s presence in the city from the mid-1960s onwards. Much more significant, however, was the broader opposition of the trades unions, which were able to mobilise thousands of supporters for counter-demonstrations against the NPD, and which were able to draw on deep antifascist reflexes present in the organised labour traditions of the city. These drew on memories of antifascist struggle in the 1920s and 1930s and of persecution and repression in the subsequent years of Nazi rule which remained powerful a generation later.

At the forefront of organised opposition, however, was the city council itself. The second half of the 1960s witnessed a series of protracted debates and legal disputes - the latter generally won by the NPD - concerning the council’s right to refuse the NPD usage of public venues which it partly owned. The legal advice the council received confirmed its own awareness that there was little it could do to prevent constitutionally admissible organisations from hiring venues dedicated for public pursuits. It was feared that refusal to allow use of the Meistersingerhalle before the 1966 local elections would constitute illegal obstruction of electioneering and enable the NPD to dispute the subsequent results.

While most city councillors - from all of the democratic parties - recognised the weak legal grounds for refusal of the use of facilities, politicians from across the spectrum argued on numerous occasions that the attempt to block the NPD should be made nonetheless, for reasons of political symbolism and ethical necessity. Successive SPD councillors argued that the issue for them was one not of legal nicety but of political obligation - powerful memories of 1933 demanded that the party be seen to be put up a struggle. But similar arguments came from the bourgeois spectrum too - as one FDP councillor opined “a Reich party rally in association with the name of the city of Nuremberg is just completely impossible”.

In May 1967, finally, the city council made the symbolic gesture of refusing the NPD entry to the Messehalle, despite the fact that its management had already entered into a formal binding contract to permit it to do so. The legal justifications it offered were, it knew, spurious; indeed, subsequent proceedings found in the NPD’s favour. However, in the immediate short term the desired effect was achieved, in that a symbolic exclusion of the NPD had occurred:

the holding of a mass demonstration of 6,000 protestors opposite the Messehalle under the auspices of the trades unions, at which mayor Urschlechter spoke on behalf of the democratic forces of Nuremberg, provided evidence of wider opposition to radical nationalist politics in the city.

Both the firm political commitment which drove the opposition to the NPD of the mainstream political parties and the more visceral antifascism of the trade-union led wider protest movement were expressions of a democratic sensibility which was by now far more deeply embedded in the political culture of the city than the radical nationalist attitudes of a minority. As the resistance to the NPD's presence in the city and on its historically-charged spaces showed, both Social Democratic and bourgeois politicians were fully aware of the significance of the rally grounds and sensitive to any attempts to annex them in renewed pursuit of nationalist and xenophobic agendas. The overwhelmingly pragmatic response to the physical relics themselves notwithstanding, the behaviour of the city council regarding the NPD demonstrates that both the knowledge and the will to act upon it in defence of the values of democratic civility were very much there: the language of repression does little justice to the presence of that democratic sensibility, which was by now firmly anchored in the city.



Entrance to the rally grounds' Documentation Centre
(photo: Susanne Rieger)

Self-victimisation as an obstacle for factual remembrance

If discussions of the rally grounds and the NPD nonetheless revealed ongoing shortcomings in the memory culture of the 1960s, then those shortcomings in fact lay elsewhere. Indeed, even as they discussed the political and moral necessity of resistance the members of the city council - including even the most progressive and historically-aware ones - demonstrated the continued lacunae in the memory culture of the 1960s. For one thing, it was clear that, as was so often the case (before and since) it was concern for the reputation of the city, as much as a desire to dispute the ideological positions of the NPD, which drove much of the commitment to resist on the part of the city's powerholders. Moreover, insofar as the opposition was rooted in the genuine antifascist reflex which characterised the politics of the Left in particular, it was a reflex born of the awareness that Nazism had brought unprecedented suffering and misery not to Europe - but to Nuremberg itself.

In other words, opposition to the NPD was grounded less in a sense that Germany, as a society which had previously committed an unspeakable act of genocide, was ethically bound by its status as a community of former perpetrators to resist fascist extremism, than in the belief that ordinary Nurembergers had themselves been the victims of fascism once before. Rather than accept the ethical postulates that followed from recognition of one's own shared complicity in criminal acts, then, the local community used opposition to the NPD to reaffirm its belief that it had been the victim of recent history and wished to avoid being so again.

This was shown most obviously in the declaration issued by the mainstream parties to mark the refusal of entry to the Messehalle in May 1967. Announcing that all those represented by the democratic majority were fully committed to the constitutional system of the Federal Republic, it reminded that "radicalism and nationalism have given rise to an unsurpassable amount of suffering, need, persecution and misery in the political life of our people"; if its general rejection of racism offered a nod to the genocidal crimes of the Nazi regime the suffering on which it focussed overwhelmingly when justifying its antifascist stance was that of ordinary Germans. In particular, the declaration claimed, these politics "led to the downfall of the city of Nuremberg in the flames of the Second World War and left the population of Nuremberg an enormous field of ruins".

Rather than contemplate the possibility that many tens of thousands of Nuremberg citizens had played their part in sustaining the fascist and racist consensus to which the NPD now looked back with such fond nostalgia, and drawing its moral opposition to the NPD from that insight, the declaration thus implied, as so often, that the population had been the actual victims of Nazi racism and nationalism themselves. Even as they sought to resist the new mani-

festation of fascist extremism represented by the NPD, the city councillors were unable to acknowledge the central truth: that Nazism had been a political phenomenon which had gained considerable acceptance in the local political culture, had successfully mobilised wide sections of the population in pursuit of its aggressive racist and imperialist agendas, and had co-opted large numbers of local people of the implementation of unspeakable crimes.

Conclusion

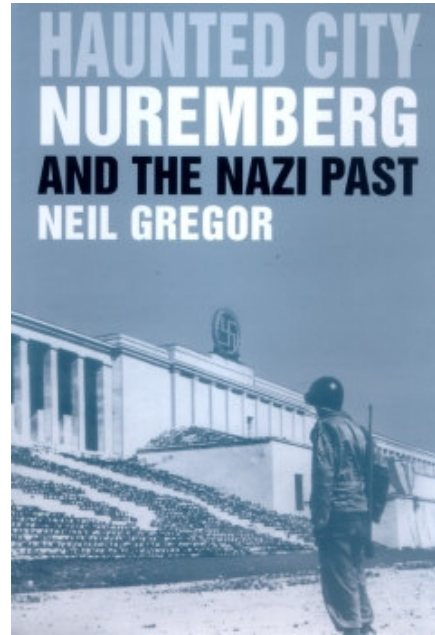
As the response of the city council to the NPD's use of the rally grounds thus showed, the problem in the local memory culture was not that the city authorities were given to denying the evidence of fascist mobilisation that existed in the form of the archaeological relics of the regime. That knowledge was very much there, and was acted upon with some decisiveness in the 1960s in successive symbolic gestures against the NPD. The problem, rather, was that the arbiters of the memory culture of the city were unable to acknowledge who, exactly, those fascists had actually been: not outsiders who came to Nuremberg, marched up and down and left, leaving awkward material residues for the city to deal with after the war, but, amongst others, many tens of thousands of local Nuremberg citizens themselves.



**„Burger King“ restaurant in the former transformer station
of the party rally grounds near Regensburger Straße**
(photo: Susanne Rieger)

Neil Gregor teaches modern German history at the University of Southampton, UK. This piece is the English version of his contribution to the German journal **transit nürnberg** and based on his book **Haunted City: Nuremberg and the Nazi Past after 1945** which was published by Yale University Press in November 2008. For more information click [here*](#)

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