

Memories of Nazism in Munich's Streets

The Dichotomy of Memorials to Victims and Resisters

A Virtual City Walk

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Introduction

Jesse: Hello, thank you for joining us. Today we will be discussing how the City of Munich remembers its Nazi past and what the memorials that occupy Munich's public spaces can tell us about the process of remembering. But first allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jesse, I am originally from New York, but I have lived in various parts of the US as well as in Germany. I'm currently living in Jerusalem where I am completing my graduate degree at the Hebrew University. One of my primary interests and fields of research is German-Jewish history and of course the Shoah—both of which relate to subjects we are going to be discussing today.

Joining me from Munich is my colleague Leo who will be taking us on a virtual city tour and helping us answer the following questions: How does Munich remember the Nazi era? How does it commemorate those who were persecuted and killed during those dark days? What about the heroic few who resisted the regime in Munich? And finally, how do memorials impact the public history and collective memory of Munich today? Leo, as we are thinking about these questions, can you tell us a bit about what we are going to see today?

Leo: Of course, I can, Jesse! But first of all, I want to say hi to everybody and I want to introduce myself. My name is Leo, as Jesse told you before, and I am 23 years old and I'm a native of the city of Munich and I have lived in and around the city for all of my life. I am studying history at the LMU Munich which you will see in a second and I am approaching my masters' degree in the field of contemporary history.

And today, Jesse and I will show you four examples of monuments to the resistance to National Socialism as well as examples of monuments to the victims of National Socialism. These are: the Weiße Rose, or White Rose in English, memorials, then the Viscardigasse, the Platz der Opfer or Square for the Victims of National Socialism and the

Stolpersteine or stumbling stones. As we explore these sites, we will see two themes shaping the commemorative culture of Munich. And these themes are, on the one hand, the commemoration of the victims and, on the other hand, the way resistance and non-compliance was and is remembered to this day. We will try to show how these two strains coexist and to a certain extent compete with each other.

The White Rose Memorials

Jesse: Great! So, let's get started with our virtual tour. You are standing in the Geschwister-Scholl-Platz on the LMU campus right now, is that correct?

Leo: Exactly! As you know, Jesse, we wanted to start our tour here at the LMU because it relates to our first topic of this tour: the Weiße Rose or as I said before, in English: the White Rose. Because this university was the site of a by-now most iconic act of resistance against the Nazis. And as some of you might know, most of members of the Weiße Rose were members of this university. So, for more details, follow me...

Right now, we are entering the main hall of the LMU and this building actually was damaged by bombing during the war.

Jesse: So, I know the story of the Weiße Rose is taught in German schools, but for those that are not Germans, would you mind explaining who its members were and what they did, especially here in this hall, that made them significant?

Leo: Sure, but before I do, let me just quickly mention that there is a little museum on the Weiße Rose close to the main hall, which is actually closed at the moment due to the pandemic which is why we can only show it from the outside. Now, let's get back to the actual topic, the Weiße Rose.

The Weiße Rose were a group who opposed Hitler, Nazism, and the Second World War. Their members included Hans and Sophie Scholl, Alexander Schmorell, Wilhelm Graf, Christoph Probst, and Professor Kurt Huber. Hans and several others were medical students who had to combine their studies with military service. As medics they experienced the brutalities of this cruel war firsthand, especially during their service at the Eastern Front in 1942. They started printing the first four of a series of leaflets even before being deployed to the Eastern Front, but their experiences enforced their beliefs even more. Overall, the Weiße Rose secretly produced six leaflets between June 1942 and February 1943. And with these

leaflets, they hoped to inform their fellow students as well as the general public about the horrors committed by the Nazi regime. The number of copies they distributed grew to over 9,000 and their message started to spread across the Reich.

But on 18 February 1943, Hans and Sophie came here, to the main building of the LMU where they intended to distribute copies of their sixth leaflet outside of the classrooms and lecture halls during the morning classes. But in their hurry, Sophie threw the leaflets from the second floor down into the mail hall—actually, that’s where we are standing right now.

But unfortunately, they were seen by a janitor and he reported them to the Gestapo which led to Hans, Sophie and a number of their friends getting arrested. And the Scholl siblings, Huber, Schmorell, Graf, and Probst were sentenced to death and executed within the next months.

Jesse: It’s quite an inspiring story of bravery! I believe that the Weiße Rose very quickly became an example of heroism that was commemorated in post-war Germany?

Leo: Yes! As early as 1946 actually, only a year after the war ended, as most of you will know, efforts to commemorate the Weiße Rose had already begun. For example, the university erected this small plaque, which we see here, written in Latin honoring the members of the Weiße Rose who “died an inhumane death” for “the love of their fellow man.” The streets outside the university were also renamed as the Geschwister-Scholl-Platz and the Professor-Kurt-Huber-Platz in their honor.

Jesse: This plaque is particularly interesting because it does not mention what they did or how they died. I feel that this is really a key aspect to understanding the German psyche right after the war. What do you think the motives behind this silence were?

Leo: Well, I think it was actually a mix of different motives. Because on the one hand, the phrasing allowed the people to view themselves as victims of an inhumane regime. And on the other hand, they didn’t have to address the specifics of the fate of Weiße Rose and the horror of the Nazi rule.

However, as we will see at many of these memorials, there was an effort in the 1980s to expand the commemoration within Munich. And in 1988 the sculptor Robert Schmidt installed this memorial depicting photographs and leaflets of the Weiße Rose in the ground in

front of the main building of the LMU, thus integrating details and eternal reminder to the bravery of the Weiße Rose into the everyday life of all LMU students until today.

Jesse: I see that there is also a bust of Sophie that is featured rather prominently here in the Lichthof. Can you tell us a bit more about her role in German popular culture today?

Leo: Yes, of course. Of all the members of the Weiße Rose, Sophie Scholl probably remains the best known, especially as an icon of resistance. That is demonstrated by several TV productions such as one from 2003, the program *Unsere Besten* (“Our Best”) where the viewers ranked the most influential Germans in history. Sophie and Hans were both voted number four, ahead of other famous figures such as Bach, Einstein, and Goethe. Adding to her iconic status was the 2005 film, *Sophie Scholl—Die letzten Tage* (English, “The Last Days”). That even got nominated for an academy award as best foreign movie in 2006. So, as I said, that really added to her status as an icon.

Right now, we will walk down the Ludwigstraße to the Odeonsplatz and the Feldherrnhalle, and there Jesse will explain to us the significance of this area for our tour.

The Viscardigasse

Jesse: Absolutely, and while we are on our way let me begin with a few remarks about the history of that site. In 1923, Adolf Hitler attempted to overthrow the government of Munich in the Beer Hall Putsch. He was stopped at the Feldherrnhalle (or Field Marshals’ Hall in English) where his supporters clashed with the Munich police. As a result of that fighting, 16 Nazis and four police officers were killed, and Hitler had been arrested. However, being imprisoned did not discourage him. He used that time to write *Mein Kampf*. And ten years later, in 1933 he had taken power in Germany.

Leo: Jesse is totally right. Today there is a memorial to the policemen who were killed, but this was not the first monument to be put up here. Before that, the Nazis had erected a memorial to the “martyrs” of their cause here. This monument, which we can see here, was always guarded, and the guards enforced the rule that everyone passing by had to do the Hitler salute to the memorial for the dead Nazis.

And I think it is also important to point out that the Residenzstraße connects the Odeonsplatz with the city center, so a lot of people had to walk along this main road past the memorial.

Jesse: Yes, and that's what makes this little alley, the Viscardigasse, so important. Not everyone supported the Nazis, and some people did not want to salute the memorial. The only way to avoid this was to turn left and walk through the Viscardigasse to the Theatinerstraße. Due to this silent form of protest, the Viscardigasse became known as "Shirker's Alley" or *Drückebergergasse*. In 1995, to commemorate this form of passive resistance to the totalitarian state, the artist Bruno Wank installed unpolished bronze paving stones in the street, creating the shining path through the alley which we see here.

However, it is fascinating to note that when Wank installed these stones, they were unpolished and blended in with the street. Over time, as people walked over them, the soles of their shoes began to polish them, and the bronze began to shine through. In a way, this is similar to how remembering the past has developed in Germany in general and in Munich in particular. It is a gradual process with unforeseen things slowly coming to light.

Leo: Yes, you can also see that the City of Munich put up this street sign here, similar to those at the Geschwister-Scholl-Platz and the Professor-Huber-Platz. However, you have to notice that this sign was put up only in 2013, so almost two decades after the memorial was installed. In fact, the memorial was intended to be a temporary exhibit. But it explains an intriguing part of history that is otherwise barely visible in the public space. And I think that this memorial is quite important to understand what everyday life in a dictatorship was like and makes me personally think about possibilities people had to resist this totalitarian Nazi regime.

The Platz der Opfer des Nationalsozialismus

Leo: And now we will walk to the Platz der Opfer des Nationalsozialismus or Square for the victims of National Socialism for everybody who does not understand German. To reach our destination we will follow the route of defiance to the Nazis through the Viscardigasse and turn right onto the Theatinerstraße, walking through the Odeonsplatz and turning left onto the Brienner Straße. We will pass the Wittelsbacher Platz, the former Gestapo headquarters (you can see the Wittelsbacher Platz here) and prison where the Scholl siblings were held after being arrested. Shortly after that we will have reached our destination.

The Platz der Opfer des Nationalsozialismus, like the Geschister-Scholl-Platz, was also renamed in 1946 by the city council. Now, we may be a bit critical of this monument, but we must begin by pointing out how close the beginning of commemoration was to the

end of the war, with much of the city still in ruins. The choice of the location was made because of its proximity to significant Nazi sites such as the Gestapo headquarters (which we just passed) as well as the Odeonsplatz and the Königsplatz (which we can see here), where also the so-called Brown House was located, which was the headquarters of the Nazi Party.

Just some side-information for you guys here. The site on which the Brown House once stood is today the place of a major commemoration site in Munich, the NS-Dokumentationszentrum (which we can see here) or, as its official name in English is, the Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism. And although it is beyond what we do in our project the Centre is an important site of public history in Munich and the entrance is free. So, have a look at it, if you get the chance to.

But now, let's get back to our tour and to the Platz der Opfer. As I said before, the square received its commemorative name in 1946, but it was not until 1985 that the city hired sculptor Andreas Sobeck to create a monument. Sobeck constructed a big granite column with an eternal flame behind bronze bars to symbolize hope and that humanity cannot be extinguished by tyranny.

Almost 30 years later, between 2012 and 2014, the site was further developed by Sobeck in cooperation with the city. They installed a bronze wall with the inscription *Im Gedenken an die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus* or "In Remembrance of the Victims of National Socialism" and a list of different kinds of persecution people had to endure such as persecution because of religion, race, politics, or sexual identity. Before this wall was erected, in 1995 the city also added a small memorial for the Sinti and Roma victims which we can see here right now.

The Stolpersteine

Jesse: This site is really interesting because we can see the different stages of victim commemoration. First there is the general stage immediately after the war, followed by a further development in the 1980s with more detailed and explicit memorials. However, we are still using very general terms here like "victims for racial or religious reasons." As we discuss the way Munich commemorates the victims of the Nazis, we have to talk about one more memorial, the *Stolpersteine* or stumbling stones.

Although we said the *Stolpersteine* would be one of the memorials we would learn about during this tour, we are actually showing you the lack of a memorial. The *Stolpersteine* are the result of a project that the German artist Gunter Demnig began in 1996. It has grown since then to be the largest decentralized memorial in the world. Demnig's idea was to place a small brass paving stone, stamped with the name, date of birth, and date of deportation, as well as date and location of death outside of the last known residence of victims of the Nazi regime. The goal of this project was to preserve the names of as many individual victims of the Nazis as possible and remind people walking by of their tragic fate. Although over 75,000 *Stolpersteine* have been requested and placed across Europe, you will find very few of these stones in Munich.

This project was strongly opposed by the president of the Jewish Community of Munich and Upper Bavaria, Charlotte Knobloch—herself a survivor of the Holocaust. She felt it was disrespectful to have the names of people who had been murdered in the Holocaust placed in the dirt of the street for people to walk over.

The issue has been very controversial and over 100,000 people signed a petition supporting the stones including survivors and their descendants. Nevertheless, the City of Munich banned them in 2004 and appeals to this were rejected by the courts in 2015. Instead, the city offers to install a plaque on the wall of the buildings or on a stele outside the building if someone requests it. These *Erinnerungszeichen* or “Signs of Memory” replace the stones that Demnig had prepared to be placed in Munich. There are very few *Stolpersteine* that can be found in Munich but those are only located on private property.

Leo: I can say from personal experience that these *Erinnerungszeichen* are or can be extremely difficult to find and to make out when you walk past them. But Jesse, you with an outsider's perspective, when you first heard of this, what were your thoughts?

Jesse: Personally, I find this argument against the *Stolpersteine* a bit ironic. One of the lawyers who tried to get the ban appealed made the very good point, that putting memorials in the street is very much part of the culture within Munich.

He used this memorial for Kurt Eisner as an example. Eisner was a Jewish-German journalist and politician who led an overthrow of the Wittelsbach dynasty in the aftermath of World War One. The November Revolution of 1918, as it was called, turned Bavaria into a Free State (*Freistaat*) and Eisner served as its first Prime Minister. After a crushing defeat of his Independent Social Democratic Party, Eisner was on his way to the Parliament of Bavaria

on 21 February 1919 to resign when he was assassinated by an antisemitic nationalist. This was one of the many acts of political violence that had destabilized Munich in the post-war era, with Hitler's attempted coup in 1923 being another.

Regarding the issue of memorials in the pavement, in addition to Eisner's, we can also mention the police officers' memorial at the Feldherrnhalle, the Viscardigasse, and the White Rose which are all placed in the street.

Yet another example of a memorial in the street, is the LGBT victims' memorial which was built in 2011 here at the crossroads of Oberanger and Dultstraße, outside of what used to be the Schwartzfischer gay bar which was raided in 1934 when the Nazis began their persecution of homosexuals.

The Gang der Erinnerung

Jesse: So, Leo, I can't help but notice that despite all these monuments we have discussed and seen, there haven't been any that are specifically for the Jewish victims. Are there any Jewish memorials in Munich's public space?

Leo: Well, kind of... And it's actually just around the corner at the Jakobsplatz. Let's discuss this question over there.

Jesse: Wow, this reminds me of Jerusalem. It looks a lot like the *Kotel* or Western Wall. So, this is the Ohel Jakob Synagogue which I know was opened in 2006 in part due to efforts of the Mayor of Munich Christian Ude who worked with Charlotte Knobloch and the Jewish Community to create this new center of Jewish life. The city gave this property to the Jewish Community and helped fund the building of the synagogue to replace the one that was destroyed during, what was previously known in Germany as *Kristallnacht*, but today is remembered as the *Pogromnacht*. Although there is also a Jewish museum on this site, it's not really a memorial.

Leo: No, it is not. Let's go inside, because actually there is a memorial underground on the way to the synagogue. What we are seeing here is the so-called *Gang der Erinnerung*, where we can find the names of the 4,500 Jewish residents of Munich that were killed in the Shoah. Jesse, what's your impression of this?

Jesse: Well, at least this is definitely a memorial. But, unfortunately, since it is underground, it's debatable whether or not we can say that it is really a memorial that is in the public space.

Leo: Actually, one reason that it was constructed underground was due to security concerns.

Jesse: That's understandable and that unfortunately shows the situation that the Jewish community throughout Europe faces today. On one hand, rebuilding centers of Jewish life, but on the other living with continual concerns for their safety.

Concluding Discussion

Jesse: So, Leo now as we are nearing the end of our tour and you are heading back to the university, let's address the questions, we asked in the beginning. You, as a native of Munich, how do you feel about how your city remembers the Nazi era?

Leo: Well, of course this is a troubling issue for me not only as a native of the city but also as a German in general. Because on the one hand, you have to recognize that commemoration of a topic as horrible as this is never finished and has to be viewed as a process especially with where the country and the city have come from. But on the other hand, I think the glorification of the resistance allows one to be focused on the wrong part of this period. This, I think, is especially problematic because this gives ground for nationalism to grow again. But to be fair, the people resisting have earned the right to be remembered by stepping up in the way they did. So, as I said this is very difficult topic where one has to be mindful of all sides when thinking or talking about it.

Jesse: Yeah, I visited a lot of cities in Germany and Munich is certainly unique in the way that it focuses on the commemoration of resistance. In fact, I read that out of all monuments in Munich related to the Nazi era, perhaps as many as 50 percent were dedicated to resistance and half of that number were dedicated to the Weiße Rose.

Leo: Well, I think that probably sounds about right, and I do not think that this should be the way. Although, we have to be fair here, again reminding of both sides, some of the most famous acts of resistance happened in Munich. I am talking about the Weiße Rose as well as about the Georg Elser assassination attempt of Hitler in November 1939. An act that also has its own memorial by the way. But in my opinion people need more reminders of not only the victims of Nazi persecution, but of what these persecuted people had to endure and how many within the German society had backed this regime.

Jesse: As someone that spent part of my childhood in the southern United States, I can relate to the struggle of dealing with the history of a racist regime. Thinking about how the

Confederacy is remembered there, I think it is really important to focus on the memorialization of the treatment of the victims. And victims' experiences and their suffering are particularly powerful and hard to refute. That is why it's a little unsettling for me how the commemoration in Munich not only emphasizes resistance so much, which as you mentioned is understandable, but it also somewhat neglects specifically the Jewish victims of the Nazi regime.

Leo: Sadly, I have to agree with this for the most part. But still, I think as a German, the Shoah is present in next to all memorials regarding this time, because of the close association between National Socialism and the Holocaust. Even seeing the synagogue as a non-Jewish German reminds me of the Shoah and although I can only speak about my experience, my personal experience, I am pretty sure there are a lot of Germans—Jewish and non-Jewish—who experience the same thing.

I also have to mention the memorial site in the former concentration camp of Dachau only a few kilometers away from Munich, which is visited by close to every school in and around Munich at some point. And the fate of Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners is remembered there.

Jesse: Yes, and not only do students visit that site, but also tourists: I remember the first time I visited Munich a few years ago, Dachau was one of the first sites I made sure to see. Yet the memorial in Dachau in some ways is similar to the Platz der Opfer, as it tries to show the various groups of people that were persecuted by the Nazis, although it is a little bit more specific since it depicts the different colored badges that the concentration camp system used to classify prisoners. So, you see the Jewish victims clearly represented by the yellow *Magen David* or Star of David patch that was used.

Leo: So, I think we can agree that there is a lot of room for improvement, but that Munich has come a long way.

Jesse: Yeah, I agree. Despite the shortcomings Munich is a city with definitely a lot of unique and thought-provoking memorials. So, Leo, thank you so much for helping us explore some of them today.

Leo: Of course, and now that we are back where we started, at LMU, we will end our virtual tour through some of the memorial sites in Munich and the necessary debate regarding them. We hope you found our discoveries as interesting as we did. And also we recommend visiting

the sites yourself if you get the chance to and maybe have a talk about it—the memorial sides—afterwards, over a beer or two. Thank you and goodbye!