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How to deal with fallen soldiers? Commemoration of Soldiers in Germany and Poland

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Inhalt

1. Introduction	1
2. Rituals, Death and Mourning	2
3. Commemoration Days in Germany and Poland	4
4. Change of Monuments	6
5. Contemporary Ways of Commemorating	10
6. Conclusion	12
Literature	13
Table of Figures.....	15
Source of Figures.....	16
Internet Sources.....	18

1. Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, Germany and Poland have found each other in the position of friendly neighbours working together in NATO and EU after centuries of enmities, occupations and cruelties. The profound changes in the European security architecture have led to new strategies of handling and framing security threats, thus also changing the image of soldiers and “death in battle”. For the first time, German and Polish soldiers are fighting together within the framework of the ISAF-forces in Afghanistan.¹ The engagement is generally justified with regard to the defence of security, human rights and an overarching idea of fostering democracy, although on the Polish side the stress on allied assistance within the NATO is much stronger. A comparison of how Germany and Poland deal with soldiers who have died in battle or are KIA – *killed in action* – promises to highlight characteristics that only become apparent in contrast. Both have very different historical experiences and partially different motives for supporting the ISAF-forces. Nonetheless, their strategies of comprehending and dealing with deaths are similar.



Fig. 1: German Memorial in Kunduz

A major discussion in Germany has ensued over the use of the term “war” and society’s insecurity and discomfort of dealing with fallen soldiers are visible each time deaths are reported. In Poland, the involvement is understood rather as proof of recaptured independence and military strength; killed soldiers are placed in the tradition of the century long struggle for independence. Nonetheless, governments in both countries face the challenge of justifying death, loss and injuries, having to answer why this intervention is in the interest of the people.

This paper aims to explore ways of commemorating the deaths of killed soldiers in Germany and Poland. First, some thought is given to death and mourning as part of the cultural memory of societies. Second, an exemplified impression of what ‘commemoration days’ in Germany and Poland look like serves as a basis for further discussion. Third, different war memorials in both countries shall be taken into account. Fourth, against the background of these examples, I shall then like to explore contemporary ways of commemoration and, fifth, discuss these themes within the ensuing body of this essay.

¹ Both countries sent troops for the ISAF-forces in 2002 and have been engaged ever since; both planning to withdraw troops in 2014. On the German side ca. 4800 soldiers are serving, 53 have died; on the Polish side ca. 2600 are doing service, 37 have died.

2. Rituals, Death and Mourning

"Death, or rather, the knowledge of our own mortality is a first-rate generator of culture." (Assmann 2000: 14)

Mourning is an individual as well social reaction to loss (see Michaels 2005: 7). Rituals and monuments have always played an important role in the process of structuring, identification and legitimisation of deaths. Mourning rituals can be seen as part of the cultural memory – as understood by Jan Assmann – of a specific group. Tombs hereby function as points of reference for social groups, which enact their particular need for remembrance of a defined group identity (Maciejewski 2005: 247). The "political mortuary cults" surrounding them take shape in the staging of funerals, certain accompanying rituals such as flags at half-mast, candles, parades, certain religious ceremonies and cults surrounding graves (ibid.). For the longest time, they have also been used to strengthen and stabilise power relations as the honouring – and also glorification – and the commemoration of deaths serve to legitimise succession in power (on this Raden 2007: 7-21).

War memorials play a big role in the formation of national identities as wars are of central importance for individual and collective remembrance and sense-making. They represent a break in continuity with which people have to come to terms, that they have to integrate into their memory, pass on to their children and, in the end, make sense of in their personal lives (Speitkamp 2000a: 9). Often wars mark breaks between



Fig. 2: Omaha Beach

before and *after* – as can be seen in the terms *Vorkriegszeit* and *Nachkriegszeit* – and lead to a reassessment of the past (Speitkamp 2000a: 9). The striving for continuity and tradition is competing with longing for breaks and new beginnings, forgetting against remembrance. Remembrance of wars has often been used for the purpose of national homogenisation and the relating of individuals to nation and state (Koselleck 1996: 268). War memorials have the power – as prescribed to them by the German historian Reinhart Koselleck – "to construct identity for survivors"(Speitkamp 2000a: 255).

Until the 18th century, dead bodies were mostly left on the battle field.² After the French Revolution, armies of mercenaries turned into people's armies – as in the liberation wars – and the simple soldier fighting for national ideas gradually transformed into a hero. During the American Civil War, the idea of burying soldiers individually on a common

² For the following see Sörries 2002: "Gefallenenbestattung" (p. 107-108), "Soldatenfriedhof" (p. 284-285), "Totensonntag" (p. 338-339).

graveyard emerged and was taken up in Europe after the First World War. The soldier had become a member of a nation fighting for people and nation, dying a “hero’s death” on the “field of honour”. The ideal of soldiers’ equality in death has been enhanced ever since (Koselleck 1996: 259). Numerous war memorials have been erected after the Napoleonic Wars and commemoration days have been introduced, in Prussia for example *Totensonntag* on the last Sunday of the church year. After the First World War, the first “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” was revealed 1920 in Paris and many more followed in other countries (Mick 2006: 182-185 and Ziemann 2000: 67-91). Plaques commemorating dead soldiers (“1939-1945”) were often added to already existing monuments after the Second World War (Koselleck 1996: 273).

With regard to mourning, a distinction has to be made between individual and collective mourning. Dealing with death and loss has undergone major changes during the 20th century (Michaels 2005: 10). We witness a growing secularisation together with individualisation and privatisation. The number of anonymous burials has been increasing heavily: in Chemnitz it amounts to 70%, in Leipzig to 50% and in Hamburg to 25% of the funerals (Michaels 2005: 10). This leads to a growing de-ritualisation as places of remembrance become less and less. In Poland, the situation is still very different: All Saints Day is usually celebrated within the family circle and life stands still on November 1st across the country.

Death has generally become more abstract – we know it from TV, where it is always the death of the “other” (Michaels 2005: 10). “Collective mourning” is staged over TV and internet, thereby changing and assimilating rituals (Michaels 2005: 8). On the internet, “virtual graveyards” are emerging as disembodied and changing places of mourning and remembrance. That the phenomenon of collective mourning is also visible today could be seen for example after the death of Princess Diana in 1997, the suicide of the German football goalkeeper Robert Enkes in 2009 or the mourning after the crash of the Polish President’s plane near Smolensk on April 10th 2010.



Fig. 3: Mourning after Smolensk

3. Commemoration Days in Germany and Poland

In the following, the focus shall be on two short examples of commemoration days in Germany and Poland. Commemoration of dead and heroes for the assurance of national identity has a long tradition in Poland (Mick 2006: 185). Especially the memory of those who died for Polish independence has been highly ritualised; graveyards have become “national monuments” (Mick 2006: 185). Nowadays, the major day of commemorating death in Poland is All Saints Day in November.³ Nevertheless, there



Fig. 4: Polish Army Day in Gdynia

are numerous days per year celebrating Polish independence fighters, soldiers, and/or veterans (Mick 2006: 185, 187, 194). The most important of these days (apart from the Anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising⁴ on August 1st) is the *Polish Army Day* (Święto Wojska Polskiego) on August 15th, celebrating the victory over the Red Army in 1920. Due to the celebration of the Assumption of Mary on the same day in the Catholic calendar it is closely interlinked with religion. It has been celebrated between 1923 and 1947 and again since 1992.⁵



Fig. 5: Lech Kaczyński at parade 2007

On this day, mass is held nation-wide, wreaths are laid down at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, speeches and honours are presented.⁶ Most of all in Warsaw, parades are happening. Soldiers who have died in recent operations are commemorated within the traditional frame, for example at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. On August 15th, the Polish president also confers decorations for soldiers. In Poland, each soldier who has taken part in combat – also in recent years – becomes a veteran and is entitled to special privileges and a burial with full military honours (Górka 2012).

On the German *People's Mourning Day* (Volkstrauertag) by contrast – due to the experiences of National Socialism⁷ –, a tranquil ceremony is held in the German Bundestag and on most graveyards all over the country. The People's Mourning Day was suggested by the German War Graves Commission in 1919, celebrated during the Weimar Republic with stress on unity and sacrifice for the fatherland and instrumentalised by the National Socialists

³ See Sörries 2002: “Allerheiligen” (p. 10).

⁴ See Krzymianowska 2007 for more detail.

⁵ <http://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/wortal/document,,id,2819.html> (accessed: 29.04.2012).

⁶ For more details see <http://halloween.friko.net/dzien-wojska-polskiego.html> (accessed: 29.04.2012).

⁷ See Maciejewski 2005: 245-266 on this.

later as a “Hero Memorial Day”.⁸ Since 1952, it has been celebrated again; now as a “quiet memorial day” on the second last Sunday of the church year (Kaiser 2010: 226-245).

On People’s Mourning Day, the focus generally lies on remembering the victims of violence and war worldwide and recalling the memory of German soldiers who have died in the two World Wars. Since 2006 – introduced by former President Horst Köhler – in the *Commemoration of the Dead* (a speech read every year at every ceremony nation-wide) thought is now also given to German soldiers who have recently died in battle outside Germany (Kaiser 2010: 397):

“Wir denken heute an die Opfer von Gewalt und Krieg,
an Kinder, Frauen und Männer aller Völker. [...]

Wir trauern um die Opfer der Kriege und Bürgerkriege unserer Tage,
um die Opfer von Terrorismus und politischer Verfolgung,
um die Bundeswehrsoldaten und anderen Einsatzkräfte, die im Auslandseinsatz ihr Leben
verloren. [...]”⁹

What becomes visible here is a blurring of the concept of *victim* and *sacrifice* (Kaiser 2010: 395) as the soldiers are placed in close proximity to the victims of violence. It seems that the People’s Mourning Day is used as a makeshift day of commemoration for want of existing alternatives; considering its functions in the past, its interpretation is once again undergoing change and the dead soldiers are placed symbolically in line with those of the two World Wars (Kaiser 2010: 394).

⁸ For the history of the People’s Mourning Day see Kaiser 2010 in detail. On “Hero Memorial Day” Kaiser 2010: 176-209.

⁹ “We commemorate today the victims of violence and war, children, women and men of all peoples. [...] We mourn for the victims of terrorism and political persecution, for the Bundeswehr soldiers and members of other action forces, who have lost their lives during foreign assignments.” [Author’s translation]. See: <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Berichte/DE/Reisen-und-Termine/1111/111113-Gedenkfeier-Volkstrauertag.html> (accessed: 02.05.2012).

4. Change of Monuments

After having had a short look at commemoration days, our attention shall now turn to monuments. Monuments structure and interpret the past; they make it available for present and future (Speitkamp 2000b: 161). They are representations of the cultural memory of a



Fig. 6: Grunwald Monument

group, offer an assessment and a hierarchy of events and symbolise the dominating views of a given time (Speitkamp 2000b: 161). Their effect, however, they only gain through communication as a social and symbolic practice. They are situated in discourse and their meaning is subject to change. As

public views change over space and time, so do the impacts of objects (Speitkamp 2000b: 162).

At the end of the 19th century, monuments were mostly signs of power and victory as the Hermann Monument near Detmold and the Grundwald Monument in Kraków illustrate. The Hermann Monument near Detmold in North-Rhine Westfalia, built between 1838 and 1875 and commemorating the victory of Hermann/Arminius over the Romans in 9 AD became a strong national myth in the 19th century propagating German unity against the “eternal French foe”. The monument of Władysław Jagiełło in Kraków was erected in 1910 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Battle of Grundwald/Tannenberg over the Teutonic knights and was seen as a symbol for Polish unity and independence. In both monuments, the self-celebrating grandeur is clearly visible. In both countries, national unity and identity should be created by *means* of monuments; by contrast to England or France where monuments were a *consequence* of national identity (on the later point see Koselleck 1994: 18). Due to federalist tradition and no universal interpretation of the defeat, no *national* army monument was erected after the First World War in Germany (Mick 2006: 184 and Ziemann 2000: 78). In Poland, the “Tomb of the Unknown” soldier was inaugurated in 1925 (see below).



Fig. 7: Hermann Monument

After the Second World War, Holocaust victims and victims of war were commemorated in Germany. In doing so, responsibility deduced from their legacy was emphasised. The German post-war memorials are characterised by a very modest and simple appearance, avoiding all ‘hero worshipping’. The German Army Memorial in Koblenz has been dedicated to “The Dead of the German Army 1914 – 1918 and 1939 – 1945 – Their legacy: peace”. Revealed in 1972, it has been extended in 2005 to soldiers who have “died carrying out



Fig. 8: Army Memorial

their service". Striking at first glance is the plainness of the monument and the small use of symbols. There are some more military memorials similarly sparse of symbols: The Airforce Memorial in Fürstenfeldbruck near Munich has been built 1957-66 and is dedicated to those who died in service during war or peace; the Navy Memorial in Laboe, Schleswig-Holstein, erected after World War I commemorates the German marines who died during both World Wars. Since 1954 it is dedicated to all sailors of all nations who died at sea.¹⁰



Fig. 9: Bundeswehr Memorial

The most recent monument for fallen German soldiers is the Bundeswehr memorial in Berlin next to the Ministry of Defence in a non-public space, but with a general claim (on the following Kaiser 2010: 389-90). It was inaugurated in 2009, dedicated to "The Dead of our Bundeswehr for Peace, Law and Freedom". Here the attempt to connect the deaths to basic

values of society becomes evident. It consists of a "Room of Tranquility" and a video installation with 3100 names (died since 1956). Hero worship shall be avoided and mortality and individuality shall be stressed. It is – telling as such – open for new entries. Historian Michael Jeismann criticised it as a "Vermeidungsdenkmal", that is a "Monument of Avoidance" as it would not answer questions regarding legitimacy (Jeismann 2009). In 2009, Minister of Defence Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg laid down a wreath on People's Mourning Day for the first time (Kaiser 2010: 397), in this way connecting the day of commemoration with the newly built monument.

Especially after system changes, monuments have been subject to irony, have been reinterpreted and only obvious objects (such as busts of Hitler) were destroyed completely (Speitkamp 2009: 34-35). Others have been integrated into new systems, such as the Leipzig Monument to the Battle of the Nations, which became a symbol of an anti-imperialistic liberation war during GDR-times or Gothic architecture in Wroclaw, formerly the German city Breslau in Poland, which was rebuilt and promoted as being specifically Polish (Speitkamp 2009: 34-35).

After 1989, monuments in Central Eastern Europe have been demolished, reinterpreted and ironised within a new context, rededicated and in some cases also put together in a museum as happened in the *Memento Park* in Budapest (ibid.). At the same time, a renaissance of traditional national symbols could be seen, including flags, hymns, crests, monuments of persons and pre-Socialist motives from the 19th century. There was a strong

¹⁰ See <http://www.deutschesheer.de>, <http://www.luftwaffe.de> (accessed: 30.04.2012) and http://www.deutscher-marinebund.de/geschichte_me.htm (accessed: 20.05.2013). For precise links see *Internet Sources*, p. 18.

wish to place and revitalise nations within a context of national history again (Speitkamp 2009: 37).

In the following, we will now turn to Polish monuments from different periods. For the



Fig. 10: Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

commemoration of fallen soldiers, the “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” in Warsaw, which dates back to 1925, is still the most important one (for detail see Mick 2006: 181-200). It was dedicated originally to those who died in the struggle for independence and the “unknown soldier” as a symbol of the nation was portrayed as a

hero (ibid.). On this memorial, there are several plaques for soldiers who died during the 19th century and the two World Wars. What you do not find, however, is any written mentioning of recently killed soldiers.¹¹

The military graveyard “Powązki” in Warsaw is one of the most important Polish places of commemoration. Founded in 1912, soldiers from all partitions were buried here during the First World War. In 1921, it gained the rank of a military graveyard and killed soldiers from the 19th century uprisings, the Polish-Soviet War 1920, the 1939 September attack, and the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 were laid to rest here. What is more, it is the most important point of remembrance for the Katyń Massacre committed in 1940 by the Soviets.¹²



Fig. 11: Military Graveyard

Concerning Polish-Russian relations, a very special monument was built not so long ago in Ossów, near Warsaw, where another important military graveyard is situated. In 2010, a memorial for 13 unknown Russian (then Soviet) soldiers from the Polish-Soviet War of 1920 in form of a Russian orthodox cross was unveiled. This was met by protests and wilful damages

beforehand because some people considered it a national disgrace.¹³



Fig. 12: Smolensk Memorial

The last example stems from 2010 and is dedicated to the 96 people including the Polish President who died in the plane crash near Smolensk in April 2010. They are considered to have died in service for the Polish nation. The Smolensk

¹¹ <http://www.um.warszawa.pl/o-warszawie/kompendium-wiedzy/grob-nieznanego-zolnierza?page=0,9> (accessed: 20.04.2012).

¹² For the above: http://sowa.website.pl/cmentarium/Cmentarze/CmWPrz_6.html (accessed: 20.04.2012).

¹³ <http://www.rp.pl/artykul/522182.html> (accessed: 20.04.2012).

memorial was erected on the military graveyard "Powązki" in Warsaw, creating a direct connection to death for Polish independence and underlining a strong sense of nationhood.

What is striking about this monument, however, is the absolute lack of national or religious symbols, which caused heated discussions after the inauguration.¹⁴ Even though it is placed in a national tradition and offers some kind of interpretation, the plainness and the lack of symbols show that the "reading" is not unanimous, but open for different socially constructed interpretations. Clashing interpretations can also be observed in the discussions surrounding the monument for unknown Soviet soldiers which once again belie the myth of Polish national homogeneity.

¹⁴ <http://www.polskatimes.pl/artykul/324116,pomnik-ofiar-katastrofy-na-powazkach-budzi-emocje-jest,id,t.html?cookie=1> (accessed: 20.04.2012).

5. Contemporary Ways of Commemorating

After having taken a look at commemoration days and different monuments, we shall now turn our attention to contemporary representations of war: Both book markets in Germany and Poland have recently seen a growing number of publications dealing with the intervention in Afghanistan. Mostly, these are reports of soldiers, collections of field post, but hardly any analytical academic works. For example, "Die reden, wir sterben" ("They talk, we die") by Timmermann-Levanas (a former professional soldier) and Richter, published in 2010, deals mostly with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder of returning soldiers. "Afganistan – Po co nam ta wojna?" ("Afghanistan – Why this war for us?") by Indulski and Kęskrawiec, published in 2007, engages with reasons for the engagement and is also a travel report of the two journalists (see Timmermann-Levanas/Richter 2010 and Indulski/Kęskrawiec 2007). Popular TV-culture has taken up the topic as well: in 2011 the first *Tatort*¹⁵ under the title "Home Front" ("Heimatfront") was shown; in Poland a TV series named "Mission Afghanistan" ("Misja: Afganistan") consisting of 13 episodes started in October 2012 on *Canal+*.¹⁶ These examples illustrate the evident urge to facilitate a public debate or involvement with on-going operations and their consequences.

The Polish Ministry of Defence has established a special web page for soldiers who died abroad. Every single soldier has a small entry with a picture and information where and how he died. This is a rather personal way of presenting and remembering killed soldiers (see <http://www.pamiecipoleglych.mon.gov.pl>). The web page of the German Bundeswehr looks rather austere in comparison. You can download a pdf-document with all names of dead soldiers, but without further details about when and how they died.¹⁷ In addition to these official pages, there are a number of widely read blogs such as the award winning Polish one (nearly 10.000 people following it on Facebook) with different articles, pictures and forums: www.zafganistanu.pl. The internet is not only used to deal with recent deaths, however, but also to commemorate soldiers who died in the two World Wars. This German online memorial book is dedicated to both and in this way it is creating a connection: www.weltkriegsopfer.de

¹⁵ *Tatort* is a German/Swiss/Austrian TV crime series running since 1970 and mostly shown on Sundays at prime time in public service broadcasting.

See <http://www.daserste.de/unterhaltung/krimi/tatort/sendung/2011/heimatfront-102.html> for more details (accessed: 25.04.2012).

¹⁶ For "Misja: Afganistan" see: <http://www.akson-studio.pl/index.php/pl/serie/misja-afganistan/> (accessed: 25.04.2012) and <http://www.misjaafganistan.pl/> (accessed: 20.05.2013).

¹⁷ See www.bundeswehr.de, "Das Ehrenmal" – "Im Gedenken", [http://www.bundeswehr.de/portal/a/bwde/!ut/p/c4/04_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP3I5EyrpHK9pPKUVL301JTUvOzUPL3UjKLUvNzEHL3M3HiYoH5BtqMiANGP9kM/](http://www.bundeswehr.de/portal/a/bwde/!ut/p/c4/04_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP3I5EyrpHK9pPKUVL301JTUvOzUPL3UjKLUvNzEHL3M3HiYoH5BtqMiANGP9kM!/) (accessed: 20.05.2013).

Recently, a debate was heated up in Germany, when Minister of Defence Thomas de Maizière proposed a Veteran's Day in February 2012 – the term "veteran" as such has only been used again since 2011. This was immediately followed by warnings of a new militarisation (Hahn 2012). In Poland there is still an ongoing debate about how to commemorate those who died in the plane crash. This also concerns for instance the idea of a memorial in Smolensk, but also general ideas about Polish identity and patriotism ("Kiedy pomnik w Smolensku", in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 15.03.2012). As these examples have shown, in both countries there is no overarching agreement on how to commemorate soldiers' deaths or how to deal with new ways of remembrance.

6. Conclusion

Without political decision, no soldiers are sent to join the NATO-forces. Thus, all commemoration in this context is always political. After 1945, violent death was delegitimised; Germans are commemorating the *victims* of war. Nonetheless, if a democratic sovereign sends soldiers to battle *for* something, then they cannot only be victims *of* something (on this Hettling 2006). Subtly, the concept of sacrifice emerges again (on this Kaiser 2010: 393).¹⁸

The return to an idea of sacrifice might be considered a growing normality, or – on the other hand – a return to traditional patterns. How different the German and Polish examples are at first sight, it is interesting to note how both countries establish links to an already existing tradition. By placing the Smolensk memorial on the most important military graveyard, the 96 victims are interpreted as sacrifices, died in service for the nation. By connecting killed soldiers and the Bundeswehr memorial in Berlin with the People’s Mourning Day a sense of continuity is underlined. On the other hand, in both countries there are heated discussions about monuments and commemorations – as for example about the monument in Ossów or in Smolensk respectively in Germany about the Bundeswehr Mahnmahl in Berlin or also about the introduction of a Veteran’s Day – which underline the different interpretations of the very same.

What we witness nowadays is not the emergence of an entirely new culture of commemoration, but a connection to established forms of commemoration and a widening of rituals. At the same time, the growth of artefacts in popular culture dealing with the intervention in Afghanistan shows the need for a public debate, a readjustment and, in the end, the wish for sense-making in an uncertain world. Commemoration Days, monuments and other depictions of loss are always subject to change and pluralistic interpretation. In the end, it is the living who have to make sense of death.

¹⁸ See Münkler/Fischer in detail for the distinction between *victim* and *sacrifice*, Münkler/Fischer 2000: 343-362.

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Table of Figures

Fig. 1: German Memorial in Kunduz	1
Fig. 2: Omaha Beach	2
Fig. 3: Mourning after Smolensk	3
Fig. 4: Polish Army Day in Gdynia	4
Fig. 5: Lech Kaczyński at parade 2007.....	4
Fig. 6: Grunwald Monument.....	6
Fig. 7: Hermann Monument.....	6
Fig. 8: Army Memorial	6
Fig. 9: Bundeswehr Memorial	7
Fig. 10: Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.....	8
Fig. 11: Military Graveyard.....	8
Fig. 12: Smolensk Memorial	8

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