

... UND DANACH

Commemoration of Soldiers Killed in Action

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*Go tell the Spartans, thou that passest by,
That here, faithful to their precepts we lie.*



With this famous verse the Greek lyricist Simonides of Ceos praised the 300 Spartan warriors under their King Leonidas and their Greek allies fallen at the Thermopylae trying to delay a much larger Persian force led by Xerxes (480 BC).

The brief verse reflects the spiritual background and explains why numerous memorial sites (with different main emphases, however) were built, honouring battles and the soldiers killed in them since ancient times and up to the present. Ever since there have been wars, man has seen himself urged to attribute a meaning to such deaths. This is expressed in the different forms of honouring the fallen. A special form of honorary burial for Greek warriors was the construction of a burial mound directly at the site of the battle.

The Romans also treated their fallen with greatest piety. Every soldier would be buried in an individual grave, if possible. When due to the war it was not possible to bury the dead bodies immediately, they would return later to do so. There are thousands of Roman gravestones of soldiers to be found throughout the Roman Empire, often giving information about life data, years of service and careers. The particular self-perception of the soldiers of the Imperial Era also in part is based on their being career soldiers.

Not only the Roman Empire but also the Germanic cultural area, as Germanic fragments of mythological texts show us, was characterised by the high esteem in which the warriors killed in action were held.

Eventually, Christianisation brought about the fall of the traditional monument culture and, therefore, also a fundamental change in treating the fallen. Instead, the belief became popular that the soul did not require a material monument. After death, the body was buried in the churchyard, and the remains were possibly transferred into a charnel house later. Contrary to the ancient times, only the nobility and high army commanders were entitled to have personal gravestones.

In the 10th century the development of sculptured gravestones for warriors was further boosted by the crusade ideal of the „Christian Knight“. Nevertheless, in the beginning, sculptured gravestones were reserved



for high army commanders and rulers. At that time, the injured and fallen were looted and usually left lying on the battlefield or buried only out of fear of epidemics.

Renaissance, also in the field of monument building, re-introduced some ancient victory signs like triumphal arches, obelisks, pyramids and statues. Monuments, however, were still reserved for aristocrats. In the Baroque era, covering the 17th and 18th centuries, the cult was carried even further with regard to the sovereign and the victorious commander. The commander, in turn, was honoured for his entire army.

Contrary to this, the common soldier received little respect and was excluded from public honours. The mercenaries and later on the soldiers of the Rococo armies, who were recruited by the state, were not worthy of monuments to be built on their behalf. Soldiers were commemorated merely within their respective armies. In this respect the social gap between officers (nobility) and the other ranks (comprising most social classes) did little to change the situation.

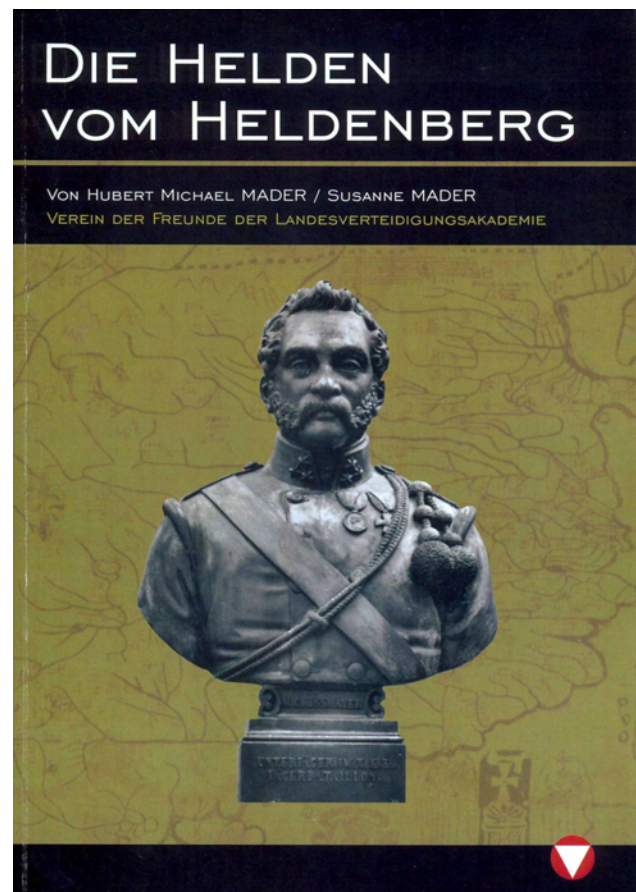
The tradition of honouring and commemorating simple soldiers started at the end of the „Cabinet Wars“, when war eventually was carried out differently and for different motives, which also caused a change in the concept of the warrior.

The turnaround was in France during the Revolution at the end of the 18th century, when, in 1792, the French were forced to enter into war with external enemies and had to recruit the volunteers needed in order to man the armies. The call „La patrie est en

danger“ for the first time addressed the individual citizen and his faithfulness to his native country. A new type of discipline appealed to the feeling and intellect of the soldier. (Strict) obedience was only then demanded.

This also had an effect on the armies of France’s enemies. It was now the task of the superiors to rally the soldiers so that they would be willing to do their duty. In other words: the feelings of duty, bravery and honour were to be instilled in the soldiers’ hearts. The new self-confidence and the honour newly won as soldiers were reflected in new monuments.

In the wake of the French Revolution, a political cult of the fallen developed for the first time. The soldier’s death was reinterpreted as a symbol of patriotism. In addition, the tradition of commemorating every freedom fighter individually was adopted. The war memorial, therefore, acquired a motivating function to those who survived: the common soldier was worthy of being commemorated in war memorials because everyone was born equal.



This idea was also adopted by France's enemies - although in a modified way. For the first time civilian memorials were constructed and to be found next to monuments built by the German and Austro-Hungarian monarchs of the 19th century. They are primarily an expression of the municipalities' pride of having contributed to the rescue of the nation.

An example to be mentioned for this is the Austrian war memorial Heldenberg at Kleinwetzdorf, Province of Lower Austria. In 1849, the army supplier Joseph Pargfrieder created a memorial for the Imperial Austrian army. He particularly commemorates those killed in the wars against Italy (1848/49) and Hungary (1849). Pargfrieder had built a mausoleum that contains the monuments to the field marshals Wimpffen (1854) and Radetzky (1858) as well as one of Pargfrieder (1863) himself.

The fact is remarkable, however, that common decorated soldiers can be found next and equal to generals. Officers and other ranks were equal, as far as bravery was concerned. This is really the revolutionary aspect of the war hero memorial sites around the middle of the 19th century. It is interesting to note that persons who were still living, not dead ones, were honoured with monuments. Therefore, at the same time, the Heldenberg documented what then was immediate, contemporary history.

In 1914, the idea of a short, 'heroic' war drove the masses on the streets. Large portions of the male youth voluntarily enlisted for military service. The results of the development of mass armies were underestimated completely. Hence the first months of the war already caused enormous losses. The war-enthusiastic youth was worn down in materiel battles and positional warfare and decimated by the use of chemical weapons and heavy weapons on the battlefield.

Traditional concepts of heroism definitely lost

their meaning. But the new way of waging war not only had a huge impact on the front. Women had to work in order to provide the income for their families. Both, on the front and throughout the country, the situation regarding supply, shortage of food, and hunger was desolate. The propaganda was aimed at the civil population's willingness to endure hardship and suffering. It was only the civil population's work that provided the armed forces with all the necessary supplies.



Already during World War I a new concept of the soldier emerged. Any soldier killed regardless of his rank was to be commemorated on a monument. Even more so, most monuments did not distinguish between officers and other ranks any more. At the same time, however, the nightmarish experience of mass destruction was simply shrugged aside. Death in war was glorified, stylised to and equated with the act of heroism. After the war this idea was reflected in numerous new-built monuments.

But the honour awarded to those killed in war often only consisted of laments. The fellow-soldiers and surviving relatives had their own way of commemorating the fallen. The lamentation of the dead was also strongly supported by pacifist ideas. Thus, the social democrats tied the memory of the fallen to the demand that there never should be war again. The principle motives here were sorrow and mourning. In effect, this means that there were already trends against the traditional way of honouring the warrior.

However, apart of the population attributed another meaning to the commemoration of the fallen: for this stratum of society this was a reminder that the war was to be resumed and the Versailles peace treaty be changed. This idea affected the design of war memorials. The tendency further gained in momentum in the national-socialist era, when national-socialism linked the honours rendered upon

dead soldiers to the ideology of the „Germanic warrior“, who was regarded as „invincible“.

National-socialist ideology glorified the fighter type, for whom mortal danger was but a test. Death on the battlefield was a heroic and exemplary act. „Heroes“ and „sons of heroes“ became the preferred denominations to be used for the fallen. „Heroic death“ was imbued with meaning by the living-on of the dead soldiers in the subsequent generation, and thus, heroic death was to lead to eternal glory. Regarding this particular meaning, the commemoration of those killed in action was increased in value to the same extent as it was reinterpreted.

The idea of mourning and Christian comfort entered into the background. Numerous monuments with pacifist contents were destroyed during national-socialism. In World War II honouring the fallen was adjourned until after the [mal victory („Endsieg“). For the sake of propaganda, dead soldier were not to be commemorated during the war. However, this was prevented by the total defeat of Hitler’s Germany.

The grievous experiences of the war and the crimes of the NS regime were rejected and condemned by all political parties after 1945. Germany and Austria started to subject their NS past to a critical review. Giving meaning to the soldier’s death also was questioned. This was linked inseparably to the question of the honour of fallen soldiers. In Austria and Germany alike there were quite differing positions

regarding this topic.

Former combatants mostly wanted to keep the traditional way of honouring dead soldiers, declining, however, a glorified point of view of soldierly virtues in the previous meaning. The idea of the „exemplary heroic death“ had to give way to that one that considers those killed as victims of war. But the anti-war sentiment of these persons was not pacifistically motivated. In the Cold War the new Forces (German Bundeswehr and Austrian Armed Forces) were rather perceived as a guarantor of peace.

Recently, the younger generations have displayed an increasing rejection of traditional moral values. This led to scepticism and even outright rejection regarding the armed forces and military service. Concepts like one’s native country and honour were soon regarded as being „connoted“ as the result of their abuse during national-socialism. Military values were questioned consistently. The commemoration of fallen soldiers also has to be reassessed in this altered political landscape. Moreover, the concept of the „victim“ could also be extended to include bomb victims, resistance fighters and those murdered in concentration camps.

Most war memorials in Germany and Austria after 1945 do not hint at external enemies at all. They rather are the latest manifestation of a monument-related culture that has lasted for centuries.



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