

The other side: Counter Memorials Culture - Germany's post-WW2 culture of apology and atonement

Illustrated Presentation by Angela Findlay

In 2009 Angela travelled across Russia with her 75-year old mother following in the footsteps her grandfather, a decorated German General had marched with his division in the 1941-2 invasion of Russia - Operation Barbarossa. This was one of several journeys that formed part of her extensive research not only into the thoughts and actions of the German side of her own family, but into the wider context of Germany during and after one of the darkest periods in western history.

Angela's personal process of finding ways to "remember" her grandfather, a potentially controversial figure who had died a week before she was born, led Angela to discover the broader process that Germany has been engaged in since the war. Unlike in other countries where war dead are honoured largely through traditional memorials set on plinths literally forcing the viewer to 'look up' in respect, Germany didn't build new memorials to their dead. Instead they were faced with complex questions such as: How does a nation of former persecutors mourn its victims? How do you commemorate destruction? How do you remember what you would rather forget?

Through powerful images Angela reveals the unique and extraordinary counter memorial movement that started in the 1980s but continues to this day seeking to address such questions. The art forms that have been emerging all over Germany since the 1980s are fascinating, challenging and highly original. Some change or disappear over time, some demand interactive responses, all aim to keep the memories alive in the minds of the observers and passers-by as they go about their daily lives.

This subject is particularly relevant in our current climate not only of World War centenaries and anniversaries but also of the wars in the Middle East and the ensuing refugee crisis. By understanding Germany's unshakable resolve to learn the lessons of history we can better comprehend the driving force behind many of their current political, cultural and social policies.

Germany's memorials shine a spotlight into the darkest episode of their history. They are like signposts to their own mistakes. They are apologies for them. By casting an unflinching gaze on the misery and futility of war, loss, destruction and discrimination they place in the foreground the innocent victims of war and are passionate and active reminders to all those who visit them that these things "must never happen again".