

German Protestants assist rebuilding notorious church

by [Tom Heneghan](#) in the [June 8, 2016](#) issue

The Garrison Church in Potsdam, Germany, would seem an unlikely monument for present-day Christians to want to rebuild.

Located southwest of Berlin, it was the parish church of old-fashioned German militarism.

Built in 1735, the Garrison Church was where prewar Germany's Protestant kaisers, kings, and generals went to pray for victory. The church is notorious in modern German history as the place where Reich president Paul von Hindenburg, a former general in full uniform with medals and spiked helmet, symbolically handed over power to the new chancellor Adolf Hitler in 1933.

A British bombing raid in April 1945 destroyed the baroque church; the ruins were demolished in 1968.

After years of debate, a synod of the Evangelical Church of Berlin-Brandenburg recently approved an interest-free loan of 3.25 million euros (\$3.7 million) to start reconstruction of the Potsdam landmark. The synod said it aimed "to support the peace and reconciliation work on the site of the destroyed Garrison Church."

The private foundation driving the project had to drop from its charter a call for the "historically accurate and complete reconstruction." For now, only the bell tower will be rebuilt, without the swords, pistols, and drums that were carved into the original facade. If a new nave is ever built, it will have to be in a modern style.

A temporary chapel on the church grounds housing a cross of nails, a symbol of postwar reconciliation launched by Britain's Coventry Cathedral, which was destroyed by German bombers, will be moved to the ground floor room at the base of the rebuilt tower.

"For me, the break with the past is visible in the fact that only the tower is built," said Markus Dröge, Berlin-Brandenburg's bishop. "With the cross of nails and the design of the room, everyone will see that this is not just some historicized church."

Rebuilding monuments in former East Germany that were destroyed in the war has been popular since the two parts of the nation reunited 25 years ago.

The imposing Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) in central Dresden was rebuilt from the remaining ruins and reopened in 2005. The reconstruction of the Berlin Palace, the city residence of the kaisers which the communists demolished, is nearing completion.

Critics claim such projects aim to restore some of the glory of the Prussian kingdom that dominated Imperial Germany and that the Allied powers dissolved after the war.

Some right-wing West German army officers collected funds in the 1980s and 1990s to resurrect the Garrison Church but failed to get planning permission. A group of mainstream leaders then launched the Potsdam Garrison Church Foundation in 2008.

This group argued that the church was a jewel of German baroque architecture whose tarnished reputation made it an ideal place for today's Germans to learn more about their history. While they rounded up support and funds, opposition groups emerged. One called For a Potsdam without the Garrison Church collected 14,000 signatures on a petition. Another group, Christians Don't Need a Garrison Church, linked it to current German army activity abroad.

"We have to ask ourselves what kind of signal we, as a church, want to send in a world where German soldiers are more and more active in wars," said Hans Misselwitz, a theologian with the second group.

The foundation responded by saying that some army officers who led the failed 1944 assassination plot against Hitler were stationed in Potsdam and worshiped at the Garrison Church.

Unlike many Protestant churches, the Garrison Church did not keep a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* on its altar next to the Bible, a spokesman argued. During the war, its organist played tunes by banned Jewish composers on the church's famous carillon.

By providing the loan, the Berlin-Brandenburg church hierarchy assured itself a role in future planning. Renke Brahms, the head of peace projects for the nationwide Evangelical Church in Germany, will join the foundation's board of trustees.

The Evangelical Church in Germany is considering making a contribution to the project, which will also get a hefty subsidy from the national government. —Religion News Service

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