

Otto von Bismarck: Reversibility Cast in Granite

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The colossal Bismarck monument in the Alter Elbpark is a Hamburg landmark. Designed by architect Johann Emil Schaudt and sculptor Hugo Lederer and constructed between 1901 and 1906, it commemorates German Reich Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, who had died three years earlier. At a height of 34.3 meters, it is the tallest Bismarck monument in the world. It stylizes Bismarck as a Hanseatic Roland with a sword; the figure of Roland having traditionally signified freedom and the rights and privileges of a medieval city.

After Bismarck died near Hamburg in 1898, a committee of influential personalities convened to decide how to honor the chancellor in urban space. It was chaired by the banker Max von Schinckel and also included the mayor of Hamburg, a member of the Chamber of Commerce, a diamond trader, several owners of shipping companies, the president of the higher regional court, and the directors of the Museum of Art and Design and of the Kunsthalle art museum.

Despite political differences between the Hanseatic cities and the German empire, Bismarck was highly regarded by the bourgeoisie and was also admired by commoners, landowners, and nationalists alike. He was shrewd enough to exploit the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the aspiring working class as a way of uniting the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. With the increasing militarization of the German empire, Bismarck wanted to claim a “place in the sun,” as the colonial territories in the global South were known in Germany. The exploitation of human beings and the plundering of raw materials in the colonies thus continued apace in order both to increase the profits of the bourgeoisie and to secure the power of the German empire. However, the apparent conflict between competing systems is suspended in the figure of Roland, which radiates a synthesis rather than a contradiction.

After Bismarck’s death, monuments sprang up everywhere financed by donations. The 700 Bismarck sculptures that still exist in Germany today illustrate that historical revisionism is still alive and kicking. Bismarck continues to be glorified as a diplomat and a peacemaker and for some people his politics serve as a model for the goal of [Germany’s] “leading Europe in order to lead the world.” On the 200th anniversary of his birth the Museum of German History in Berlin joined forces with the Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung to stage a symposium entitled: “*Realpolitik* for Europe – Bismarck’s way.“

In Hamburg, too, the Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung is making an effort to rescue the former Reich chancellor’s reputation by reinterpreting and de-politicizing the controversial monument in the Alter Elbpark. The historian Ulf Morgenstern, who works for the Stiftung, explained that in the early twentieth century the figure of Roland was intended to express the independent spirit of Hamburg’s citizens. According to him, the monument says less about Bismarck the politician than about the history of Hamburg.[1] But in that case which narrative did the committee intend to manifest? The history of Hamburg is, after all, inextricably linked with Bismarck’s

oppressive colonial policy. Trade in colonial and looted goods continues to form the basis for the wealth of many companies to this day. By interpreting the monument as an expression of the city's self-esteem, what Morgenstern is actually doing is asserting the class interests of the bourgeoisie. The working class were particularly critical of the monument and boycotted its inauguration in 1906, not least because Bismarck had used the Anti-Socialist Laws to suppress workers from the Social Democratic and Communist movements.

During the Nazi era Bismarck was proclaimed as a hero of what the Nazis called the "Greater German Reich." The monument in the Alter Elbpark was adorned with swastikas and the catacombs beneath it turned into a bunker. Until well into the postwar years it remained a symbol and place of pilgrimage for right-wing extremist organizations. During the Third Reich many companies were also able to build on their previous economic success under Bismarck, continuing to reap large profits through loyalty to the regime, forced labor, and the war economy.

As the struggle for decolonization began, the narrative portraying Bismarck as the diplomatic chancellor was revealed to be a web of lies. During the Black Lives Matter protests many statues of Bismarck were branded as colonialist memorials. Given the resistance put up by colonialism's victims, the danger today is not so much that its crimes will be swept under the carpet, but rather that Bismarck's role will be de-politicized and portrayed in revisionist terms.

Hamburg-based initiatives have been calling for a more critical approach to the colossus in the harbor for a long time, but so far their efforts have not gone beyond workshops and reversible or temporary interventions. Demands to tear down the statue have repeatedly been rejected by Hamburg's Senator for Culture Carsten Brosda, who says that for him "tearing down the statue is not an option, because it would deprive Hamburg of the opportunity to address critically the tensions generated by the monument." [2] In considering how to treat controversial monuments and buildings this argument is advanced as a metaphysical truth along the lines that buildings should be retained for their "disturbing" effect and contextualized via memorial plaques or temporary interventions. Since 2020 the monument has been renovated at a cost of nine million euros apparently to preserve this "disturbing feeling."

In early 2023 the city's cultural authority put out a tender for a critical contextualization of the monument. Under the title "Rethinking Bismarck" artists and architects were asked to come up with ideas to break with previous perceptions of the monument in order to foster a permanent critical confrontation with its history, albeit one that is neither tendentious nor ideologically loaded.[3]

Assigning the task of remembrance to the artistic sphere often means de-politicizing it and divesting it of meaning. As James E. Young writes in his text *The Counter-Monument*, with reference to commemoration of the Nazi era, steles and sculptures often become a substitute for a proper reappraisal or sometimes simply a way of enhancing a tourist destination.[4] Artistic strategies should not result in politics

becoming clothed in aesthetics, and this applies just as much to the treatment of military and nationalist monuments. Politicizing art requires activist alliances. History can be addressed and communicated both discursively and reflectively. If we are to break the monumental power of memorials and statues and inscribe practices of resistance into history, we will need to carry out physical interventions in the building substance. Memorial plaques are simply not sufficient to overcome architectural and ideological revisionism.[5]

The cultural authority reiterates in its invitation to tender that it is neither willing to position itself on the matter nor to inscribe any criticism into the monument itself. “Any intervention must adhere to the binding specification that the substance of the monument, which has been legally protected since 1960, should be neither altered nor damaged [...]”[6]

[1] See Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung, Hamburg eröffnete Debatte über sein Bismarck-Denkmal, 2020, <https://www.bismarck-stiftung.de/2020/11/20/debatte-ueber-bismarck-denkmal/> (accessed: Jan. 22, 2023)

[2] Ibid.

[3] See Stiftung historische Museen Hamburg, *Bismarck neu denken*, 2023, p. 11.

[4] See James E. Young, *The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today*, 1992.

[5] See Katharina Morawek, Nora Sternfeld, *Visuelle Geschichtspolitik im öffentlichen Raum*, Bildpunkt, smrt postnazismus, 2011.

[6] See Stiftung historische Museen Hamburg, *Bismarck neu denken*, 2023, p. 14.

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