

Garnisonkirche in Potsdam: President Steinmeier inaugurates a symbol of German militarism

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On Thursday, August 22, the newly rebuilt tower of the Garnisonkirche (Garrison Church) in Potsdam will be inaugurated. Among the speakers will be Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who took over the patronage of the project initiated by right-wing extremists seven years ago.

The Garnisonkirche, like few other buildings, embodies the criminal traditions of German militarism. Built in the 1730s on the orders of the “Soldier King” Friedrich Wilhelm I, it served for over 200 years to indoctrinate soldiers who were sworn to unconditional obedience and received blessings before they put down the revolutions of 1848 and 1918, slaughtered rebellious Boxers in China and Herero and Nama in Namibia, or were sent into the machine-gun fire of the First World War.

During the Weimar Republic, the church became a place of pilgrimage for anti-democratic and right-wing extremist forces. This culminated on March 21, 1933 in the infamous “Potsdam Day,” when the Nazi dictatorship was enthroned with a symbolic handshake between Adolf Hitler and Reich President Paul von Hindenburg. The church became a place of worship in the political cult of the Nazi regime.

In 1968, the church, which had been severely damaged during the war, was blown up by the regime of the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany).

The campaign for its reconstruction began long before the end of the GDR in right-wing extremist circles in the Federal Republic (West Germany). After German reunification in 1991, this campaign was continued with redoubled effort. In addition to ultra-conservatives and right-wing extremists, such as the

later chairman of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), Alexander Gauland, the Protestant Bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg, Wolfgang Huber, and several Social Democrats, including the Brandenburg state prime ministers Manfred Stolpe and Matthias Platzeck, also participated.

There was hardly any support from the population, however. Donations were scarce, so that in the end the largest part of the construction costs of €42 million was financed by the federal government. The 30-metre-high dome, which is to raise the tower from 60 to 90 metres, is still missing.

The more overtly the reactionary character of the project became known and the more criticism it received—in 2019, over 100 architects, academics and cultural figures called for it to be abandoned in the “Ruf aus Potsdam” (Call from Potsdam)—the more openly the highest state authorities supported it. Seven years ago, Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD) personally took over the patronage of the project.

Now, an attempt has been made to repackage the undertaking. The tower was “both an architectural memorial for the city of Potsdam and a building that has been given a new purpose, one that is directed towards peace, justice and democracy,” claims former Bishop Huber, who is one of the oldest supporters of the Garnisonkirche, in numerous interviews. A permanent exhibition titled “Faith, Power and the Military” is even to be set up within its walls, which will deal with the “difficult history” of the church.

This is, of course, absurd. Why should a symbol of crime be rebuilt with millions in state funds, only to be used to commemorate these crimes afterwards? Even

the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* asks the question, “Why should we bring back an architecture only to warn against the ideology it represents?”

The answer is obvious. A place of pilgrimage for right-wing extremists and militarists is being built here—with the obligatory cautionary footnotes—because the ruling class needs them.

Defence Minister Boris Pistorius (SPD) has said he wants to make Germany “war-ready” again. Last week, German tanks crossed the border from Ukraine into Russia near Kursk for the first time since 1941. The German government is financing the war in Ukraine with billions of euros with the aim of making Ukraine completely dependent and crushing Russia in order to gain control of its gigantic resources. In Gaza, Berlin is supporting a genocide that is becoming more and more reminiscent of the crimes of the Nazis.

This return to the most brutal forms of militarism requires a revision of history and a revival of the cult of the military hero. The crimes of Hitler’s army, the Wehrmacht, which have been remembered with horror for generations, must be trivialised and rehabilitated. That is why barracks are once again being named after Wehrmacht generals and the responsibility for the Second World War is being shifted from Hitler to Stalin. The rebuilding of the Garnisonkirche also serves this purpose.

Steinmeier is an expert at using unctuous words to promote the return to militarism. He will provide the inauguration of this reactionary building with a state-sanctioned significance. There is hardly a memorial act marking Nazi crimes in Poland or the Baltic states at which Steinmeier does not appear, using confessional gestures to fuel the war against Russia.

In 2014, when he was still foreign minister, Steinmeier was one of the architects of the right-wing coup in Ukraine that set the course for today’s war. He was personally in Kiev when the elected president Viktor Yanukovich was overthrown, working together with, among others, the leader of the fascist Svoboda party, Oleh Tyahnybok.

Prior to this, Steinmeier—together with the then-Federal President Joachim Gauck and Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen—had announced that the time was over when Germany only commented on world politics from the sidelines. Germany was “too big and too important” to stay out of the world’s crisis areas

and hotspots any longer.

His patronage of the Garnisonkirche project must be seen in this context. We recommend that our readers read the detailed article about the Garnisonkirche which the WSWs published in December 2022. It can be accessed here: Garnisonkirche Potsdam: A Symbol of German Militarism is Being Rebuilt



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