

THE CEMETERY OF THE MARCH REVOLUTION IN BERLIN. A KEY SITE IN THE HISTORY OF EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

EL CEMENTERIO DE LA REVOLUCIÓN DE MARZO EN BERLÍN. UN LUGAR CLAVE EN LA HISTORIA DE LA DEMOCRACIA EUROPEA

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Received: 08/07/2020 • Accepted: 03/10/2021

Doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.6018/rmu.436081>

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Abstract

This essay presents the cemetery of the March Fallen from its foundation in the European Revolution of 1848-49 to the present. During the revolution of 1918-19 the cemetery was expanded and over time it was repeatedly transformed in the different political systems. Right from the start, the Cemetery of the March Revolution has always been a place for two purposes: the personal grief of relatives of the dead, and mass demonstrations and political commemorative events to promote civil and human rights. Sites of remembrance for the history of European democracy such as the cemetery of the March Revolution help strengthen our shared cultural and political roots and help to establish a European culture of remembrance.

Key words

Berlin, cemeteries, 1848, history of democracy, transformation.

Resumen

El presente artículo aborda el Cementerio de la Revolución de Marzo desde su fundación en la Revolución Europea de 1848-49 hasta la actualidad. Durante la revolución de 1918-19, el cementerio fue ampliado y, a lo largo del tiempo, se ha ido transformando repetidamente según los diferentes sistemas políticos. Desde el principio, el Cementerio de la Revolución de Marzo ha sido un lugar que ha cumplido dos propósitos: ser espacio del luto personal de los familiares de los fallecidos y escenario de manifestaciones masivas y actos políticos conmemorativos para promover los derechos civiles y humanos. Los lugares de recuerdo de la his-

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toria de la democracia europea, como el Cementerio de la Revolución de Marzo, contribuyen a reforzar nuestras raíces culturales y políticas comunes y a establecer una cultura europea del recuerdo.

Palabras clave

Berlín, cementerios, 1848, historia de la democracia, revolución, transformación.

1. THE FOUNDING OF THE CEMETERY IN THE REVOLUTION OF 1848

A wave of revolutionary activity swept through Europe in 1848 and 1849: in Paris, Milan, Palermo, Vienna, Budapest, Cracow, Berlin and many other places, liberal workers, citizens, tradespeople and members of lower classes overthrew the old ruling structures. They fought for democracy, civil rights and liberties, and social justice.

Three key components of the revolutions of 1848-49 went on to shape politics throughout Europe: 1) constitutions and democracy; 2) ambivalence between nation-building and the «springtime of peoples», and 3) the social question (Rapport, 2008: IX-XII; Rürup, 2013: 30-32).

The revolutions of 1848-49 are also of great significance for Europe as a whole because they did not arise within the context of war but instead represent a fundamental politicisation of a great many people across Europe (Rapport, 2008: 398f.; Jansen, 2008: 38). These revolutions are thus an important foundation stone in the history of our democracy.

Berlin was the third major revolutionary metropolis, alongside Paris and Vienna. It was during this revolution that the Prussian capital first became a «red bastion», with transregional repercussions, and made a decisive developmental step from a seat of royal power to a major cosmopolitan city (Hachtmann, 2012a; Hachtmann, 2012b: 17-20).

On 18 March 1848 around 10,000 Berliners gathered outside the palace in high spirits because of the king's concessions, which included –albeit half-heartedly– lifting censorship and convening a national assembly. There were also a large number of soldiers on the square in front of the palace. The people



Image 1. *The barricades on Kronenstrasse and Friedrichstrasse on 18 March by an eyewitness, 1848, F.G. Nordmann. Rights: commons.wikimedia.org.*

called for the soldiers to withdraw, but that did not happen. Instead, two shots rang out –probably unintentionally– and the situation escalated.

Many Berliners quickly set about raising barricades and defending them against the oncoming soldiers. The number of barricades –some three storeys high– was said to exceed 900. Armed clashes continued throughout the night, with the king waiting until the morning of 19 March before ordering the soldiers to retreat. The revolution had prevailed, at least at first. About 250 revolutionaries, including women and many young people, lost their lives.

Only 20 soldiers died. The disproportionate number of dead among the barricade defenders –more than 90 percent of the total– was the result of often very violent and brutal measures used by the military against the revolutionaries (Rapport, 2011: 87-92; Hachtmann, 1997: 152-167).

Four days later, on 22 March 1848, 183 of the people who died on the barricades were buried in a cemetery founded specifically for this purpose, namely what in German is called the *Friedhof der Märzgefallenen* and in English is sometimes translated literally as the «Cemetery of the March



Image 2. Adolph Menzel, *Die Aufbahrung der Gefallenen der Märzrevolution in Berlin 1848*. The dead of the March Revolution in Berlin 1848 are laid out, bpk.

Fallen» but is more clearly known as the «Cemetery of the March Revolution». Provisional plans to bury barricade fighters and soldiers at the same place were dropped due to massive resistance by relatives of both the revolutionaries and the soldiers.

The location of the cemetery was determined by a committee formed for this reason, consisting of members of the municipal administration and assembly. They selected part of Berlin's first public park, Volkspark Friedrichshain, right on the outskirts of the city at the time (Hachtmann, 1997: 214f; Hettling, 1998: 20f).

On 22 March, the day of the burial, shops remained closed, and black-red-gold flags were hung throughout the city in addition to traditional black funeral bunting.

A funeral procession of more than 100,000 people set off from the Gendarmenmarkt, where the bodies had been laid out, and proceeded past the palace to the Friedrichshain park. Among the coffins were flags of «foreign peoples who like us were recently liberated», such as the green-white-red of Italy. A group from the Polish Legions was also present with the red and white

flag of their country. As they passed the palace the king removed his hat –reluctantly– to pay respect to the dead (Hettling, 1998: 28-35; Hachtmann, 1997: 216).¹ In the words of historian Manfred Hettling, the funeral ceremonies were «a major political event, a state funeral [...] a state funeral from below. A few days after a conflict verging on civil war, a society was now attempting to consolidate a new consensus and render its content explicit» (Hettling, 1998: 19).

Unusual for the time was the fact that people of different religions and denominations –Protestants, Catholics and Jews– were buried at the cemetery. A Protestant minister, Catholic priest, rabbi, and Democratic Club president Georg Jung all spoke at the ceremony. It was also unusual to hold a political speech at a funeral. Those who subsequently succumbed to their injuries from the barricades were also buried in the Cemetery of the March Revolution. A total of 255 people who died in the revolution of 1848 were interred there (Hachtmann, 1997: 216-219; Hettling, 1998: 35-41).

2. EXPANSION FOR THE INITIAL VICTIMS OF THE REVOLUTION OF 1918-19

When the revolution of 1918-19 reached Berlin at the end of the First World War, the Cemetery of the March Revolution was already steeped in symbolism and broadly anchored in society, whether positively or negatively. This revolutionary cemetery not only commemorated the dead. It was also repeatedly used to call for civil and human rights.

In the second half of the 19th century, calls for rights were made under increasingly dangerous conditions at the cemetery. There were numerous instances of violence by the police, who strictly monitored the site on memorial days.

The cemetery was therefore the natural place to bury the revolutionaries who died on 9 November 1918.

A plenary session of the Workers and Soldiers Council promptly resolved on 10 November 1918 to inter these individuals in the Cemetery of the March Revolution. The executive body of the Workers and Soldiers Council confirmed the decision two days after that (Minutes, 12 November 1918).

¹ Hachtmann (1998) is the source of the quote that comes from Paul Boerner, *Erinnerungen eines Revolutionärs*.



Image 3. *Cemetery of the March Revolution 1848*. Stadtmuseum Berlin Foundation.

A total of 29 people who had died in the revolution of November and December 1918 were buried in the Cemetery of the March Revolution, with a large public presence and three long funeral processions, and with direct reference to the March Revolution (Minutes, 10 November 1918; minutes, 12 November 1918).

The city authorities decided not to bury the many more people who subsequently died in clashes in January and March of 1919 in the Cemetery of the March Revolution. This decision reflected the growing split within the working class, which became yet more pronounced after the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) was founded in late 1918 (Gaida & Kitschun, 2020).

3. SIGNIFICANT CULTURAL HERITAGE SITE. ON THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORICAL PRESERVATION

The great cultural and historical significance of the Cemetery of the March Revolution lies in the fact that it was created by the revolutionaries themselves. In the apt words of Jörg Haspel, a leading former historical

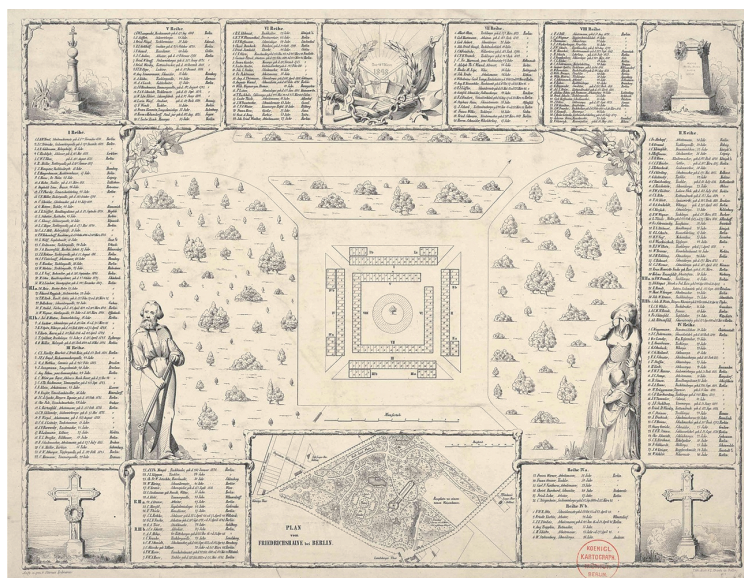


Image 4. Erdmann plan of 1848, Paul Singer association.

preservationist in Berlin, that makes it «an authentic cultural product of the revolutionaries, dedicated to the future by remembering the aims of a defeated opposition movement, and repeatedly noted and defended anew by those for whom this historical act was an important political legacy». What makes the Cemetery of the March Revolution unique is the fact that it is both *testament to* and *testimony of* the revolution of 1848 (Haspel, 2012: 51f; *ibid.*, 2018: 2).

This feature distinguishes it from other significant sites of remembrance for the revolution of 1848-49, such as the classical Saint Paul's Church in Frankfurt am Main or the «March obelisk» erected decades later in Vienna.

The Cemetery of the March Revolution is also certainly of *European significance* among the memorials and sites of remembrance for the revolutionary year of 1848, although the association remains somewhat vague.

This is because we unfortunately still lack a comparative study with a Europe-wide overview of memorials and sites for the revolutionary events of 1848-49. As the 175th anniversary approaches, we seek to initiate a European conference on this topic.

In formal and legal terms, the Cemetery of the March Revolution is no longer a cemetery but rather a landscape memorial (*Gartendenkmal*). It was probably deconsecrated during the restructuring process in 1948. For us, however, it remains a burial site.

Over the course of its history the Cemetery of the March Revolution has been restructured multiple times under different political systems. The different degrees of historical preservation also reflect differing and conflicting views of the revolution of 1848-49.

In the beginning everything seemed clear. Even before the barricade fighters were buried, the Berlin city assembly decided on 21 March 1848 to build two memorials to them, one in the centre of the city and one at the cemetery. The Prussian national assembly confirmed this decision in February 1849. But neither memorial was built. Instead, as the revolution was suppressed in the 1850s, it even became harder to enter the cemetery. In fact, for part of the time, the entire site was closed off by a 2-meter-high wooden fence (Hachtmann, 1997: 850f; Ernerth, 2012: 32).

In the meantime, opposing currents were gaining strength and in 1854 a column in Berlin's Invalidenpark –nearly 40 meters high and weighing 70 tons– was erected and dedicated to honour the Prussian soldiers who had died during the revolution (Hachtmann, 1997: 855).

After being expanded in late 1918 to hold the early victims of the revolution of 1918-19, the cemetery was renovated and its landscape architecture upgraded in the Weimar Republic. A new portal designed by Ludwig Hoffmann, the head of the Berlin municipal building office, was installed to reflect the importance of the site. A period of decline then followed under the Nazis.

The Cemetery of the March Revolution was extensively restructured in preparation for its 100th anniversary. It is located in what was East Berlin, and in 1947 the centenary project was commissioned jointly by authorities in both parts of the city. However, the plans and work were overshadowed by the incipient division of Berlin and the accompanying rivalry between the two systems. The actual celebrations in March of 1948 were held separately.

The new design of 1948, which called for grass on the central field of graves with a memorial stone in the middle, represented a major shift from individual to collective commemoration of the dead. In the course of the restructuring work in 1947, 13 of the 37 remaining gravestones were lost. However, they are still underground at the site as has been revealed by archaeological excavations.



Image 5. *Cemetery of the March Revolution with sailor and sarcophagus slabs.* Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum.

The remaining gravestones were rearranged for aesthetic reasons, with the result that none are still in their original locations. The individual graves themselves are no longer visible, and the names of the dead are only found on the back of the memorial stone.

In 1948 concrete slabs were laid over a large area that covered the western 48 graves, to create a space for large gatherings (Friedrichshain municipal planning office, 1947; Ernerth, 2012: 31-34; *ag friedhofsmuseum berlin et al.*, 2013: 8-10).

To mark the 40th anniversary of the revolution of 1918-19 in 1958, planners in the GDR also began redesigning and deindividualising the part of the cemetery with graves from 1918. It should be noted, however, that at this point it would have been difficult to reconstruct the individual graves. Three porphyry sarcophagus slabs with quotes by leading Spartacus member and co-founder of the German Communist Party, Karl Liebknecht, and by the chairman of the State Council of the GDR, Walter Ulbricht, were laid on top of the front part of the three rows of graves. A wall was also erected around the site, and the *Red Sailor* sculpture by Hans Kies was added in 1961. The focus of both the cemetery's new design and associated official events in the GDR was on commemorating the revolution of 1918-19.



Imagen 6. *Cemetery of the March Revolution*. Paul Singer association.

That new design, which reflected the historical policy aims of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the GDR, is the one we still see today. There is also another memorial layer underground –not visible– in which some of the gravestones buried in the post-war years are still embedded in or near their original locations (Ernerth, 2012: 34-36; Haspel, 2012:61f).

An archaeological excavation was carried out at the cemetery in the summer of 2019 under the supervision of the state historical monument office, during which some of the lost gravestones were rediscovered at their presumed locations.

One of these gravestones from the founding period –for 29-year-old Gustav Ripprecht– will be displayed at the future visitor centre. Of note here is not only his age but also the very personal inscription:

*For my dearly beloved husband,
the pastry maker Gustav Ripprecht.*



Image 7. Rally at the Cemetery of the March Revolution on 4 June 1848, akg-images

4. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SITE FOR THE HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY

Right from the start, the Cemetery of the March Revolution has always been a place for two purposes: the personal grief of relatives of the dead, and mass demonstrations and political commemorative events to promote civil and human rights.

Even at the first funeral, Georg Jung, the president of the Democratic Club (*Demokratischer Club*) invoked something like a political legacy for the fallen revolutionaries in his eulogy:

Off into eternity and the night of oblivion go all the walls of separation among people [...]. There is no rabble anymore, no rough mob, no riff-raff; for we, so say the dead, have sealed your charter of citizenship and liberty with our blood. Thus we bequeath, thus is the last testament [of the dead of March], the same rights to all, the same law, the same share in the making of laws. May you speak and write freely, and assemble freely. (Eulogy by Georg Jung, held at the Cemetery of the March Revolution on 22 March 1848. Wolff, 1851 as cited in Hachtmann, 1997: 218).

The Cemetery of the March Revolution was the place in Berlin where people in the 19th and early 20th centuries remembered the revolution of 1848 and its victims. It later also became the place to remember the Paris Commune of 18 March 1871 and the revolution of 1918-19. Most commemorative activities were done by members of the workers' movement, but also of the middle-class Democratic movement. Like Hambach Castle and Rastatt Fortress, the Cemetery of the March Revolution is not only an «original theatre of history» but was also the «site of a popular culture of remembrance for decades before much later becoming part of an institutionalised and at least partially state-sponsored official culture of remembrance» (Hachtmann, 2010: 28f; Braun, 2016: 250).

On 4 June 1848 a large procession to the Cemetery of the March Revolution took place, followed by a rally on the grounds with twelve speakers, including Stefan Born the founder of the Workers' Committee (*Arbeiterkommittee*), and also a representative of the excavation workers. In addition to honouring the dead, the primary aim was to strengthen and defend the achievements of the revolution (Hettling, 1998: 47; Hachtmann, 1997: 556-560).

The Cemetery of the March Revolution was of especially great significance for members of the lower classes. This is unsurprising given that around 85 percent of those buried in it from the March Revolution came from the non-propertied classes. These were people without material assets and without a recognised political voice, primarily impoverished tradesmen and labourers, including some women. Many were very young; more than a third of those who died in the battles of March were not yet 24 years old. In the great majority of cases, nothing more than their names, places of residence and occupations have survived (Hachtmann, 1997: 173-182; *ibid.*, 2013: 23-26).

Precisely the fact that most of the Berlin barricade fighters were people of little if any public profile is what makes this cemetery so relevant to efforts to uphold a democratic tradition. These individuals had the courage, at a critical moment, to put their lives on the line for freedom, human rights and better conditions of life.

The importance of individual actions for the success of democracy is the starting point for our educational programmes. The aim is to present the Cemetery of the March Revolution as a positive place to identify with European and German history. Current events are always relevant: how

can and do young people today want to help strengthen and defend our democracy? What needs for reform do they see?

Familiarity with the long struggle to achieve freedom and democracy makes people more aware of the dangers currently facing our underlying democratic consensus. Besides continuing to remember the unimaginably horrific crimes of the Nazi dictatorship and the injustice of the SED regime, our democracy also needs historical traditions that highlight positive initiative and commitment by broad sectors of the population for freedom and social rights.

5. DEVELOPMENTAL STEPS TOWARD A NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN SITE SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY

– *Paul Singer Verein: the association supporting the cemetery.* The Paul Singer association (*Verein*) has been working for about 20 years to achieve proper recognition for the Cemetery of the March Revolution and its development as a national and European site that fosters democracy. Paul Singer, the association's namesake, was a Jewish factory owner, member of the Reichstag from the Friedrichshain district of Berlin, and chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

– *2009 to 2013: structural repairs of the cemetery facilities and installation of a temporary information pavilion.* A two-part exhibition entitled «At the Foundation of Our Democracy» about the European and the German revolutions of 1848 was developed for the information pavilion before the cemetery. In addition, a temporary outdoor exhibition with information about the cemetery was installed on the grounds.

The part of the exhibition about the March Revolution in Berlin can still be viewed today.²

– *2018 to 2019: new permanent outdoor exhibition.* The rich history of the site is displayed on free-standing panels placed along the walkways, with an additional group of panels describing the revolution of 1918-19.

² For more extensive treatment of the first lottery-sponsored project and the first temporary exhibitions, see Kitschun, 2010, 63-69.



Image 8. *New outdoor exhibition, 2019. Paul Singer association.*

The exhibition also includes a panel describing sites elsewhere in Europe that commemorate the revolution of 1848-49, using Paris, Vienna, Budapest and Milan as examples.

A multimedia digital dimension to the exhibition invites visitors to engage further with the content. Also, thanks to the digital component, the panels could be limited in number to comply with historical preservation guidelines and omitted entirely from the heart of this landscape memorial.

– *Educational programmes on democracy.* Even before creating the first exhibition, the Paul Singer association launched comprehensive educational programmes in history and political science tailored especially to schoolchildren. Many groups of adults have now taken part as well. Around 14,000 people a year currently visit the cemetery and exhibition.

6. GREATER AWARENESS OF THE ROOTS OF OUR DEMOCRACY

The House of European History in Brussels, which opened in 2017, stresses the important role of the 19th-century revolutions in Europe:

The nineteenth century was a revolutionary period for European history [...] Taking inspiration from the French Revolution of 1789, people across Europe challenged the aristocratic ruling classes and fought for the development of civil and human rights, democracy and national independence (House of European History, guidebook, permanent exhibition, 2019).

Asked for examples of the shared parts of European history, the museum's director Constanze Itzel began by naming the revolutions of the 19th century (*Der Standard*, 7 November 2019).

In recent years Germany has seen an increasing number of statements along these lines from researchers and politicians, who call for reflecting more strongly on the roots of our democracy. The last president of the Bundestag (federal parliament), Norbert Lammert (CDU), and especially the president of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), explicitly advocate strengthening democratic traditions. Ever more people are recognising the Cemetery of the March Revolution as a key site in the history of European and German democracy.

The Bundestag instituted a federal programme to promote sites of historical importance for democracy (*Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 4 March 2012; *Die Zeit*, 13 March 2019; Conference report, 8 April 2019; German federal parliament: 19/11089).

In 2023 we will celebrate the 175th anniversary of the revolution of 1848. By then our ambitious aim is to have completed a visitor and information centre for the Cemetery of the March Revolution. The requisite funding was approved last year by the federal parliament and the state parliament of Berlin.

This will be a very important step, because until we have an actual building for the exhibition, all of our activities necessarily depend heavily on the weather.

7. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLACES LIKE THE CEMETERY OF THE MARCH REVOLUTION IN HIGHLIGHTING THE HISTORY AND LEGACY OF EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

The Cemetery of the March Revolution is an authentic product of the revolutionaries of 1848. In addition to the events of 1989-90, the revolution of 1848-49 is the most important pan-European phenomenon of the last 300 years that did not arise in the context of war.

We do not yet have a comparative Europe-wide study of the memorials for this revolution and of sites that commemorate the history of European democracy. As such, we also lack a basis for Europe-wide collaboration by experts and organisers at these memorials and sites for the history of European democracy.

Our aim must be to use the momentum leading up to the 175th anniversary of the revolution to close gaps in research, promote joint international projects, and build an international network.

One idea is to create something like a «European revolutionary history route», namely a cultural route to major sites in the history of European democracy and revolutions, separate from and in addition to the European cemetery route.

We also need to focus on the historical roots of our democracy in Europe and its legacy because autocrats, nationalists and right-wing populists are devoting ever more frequent efforts to instrumentalise memorials to the European revolution of 1848. In Germany, the AfD party views its protests as partaking in the tradition of the revolutionaries of 1848.

On Hungary's national holiday of 15 March, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán invokes the struggles that began on that day in 1848 and ongoing efforts for independence in his country (AfD, 2018: 11; *MDR Aktuell*, 13. September 2019; *Pester Lloyd*, 16 March 2015).

In Austria, Jörg Haider, former chairman of the nationalist Freedom Party (FPÖ), claimed the legacy of the revolution of 1848 for his party (Häusler, 2017, 239f).³

«European memories [...]», write Étienne François and Thomas Serrier, «are not ironclad. They live in the many individuals who share them. They are constantly subject to reformulation, and they will be what we make of them» (François & Serrier, 2019: 19).

Key sites in the history of democracy like Berlin's Cemetery of the March Revolution can serve as foundation stones for European identities and narratives.

Let us not leave them to the nationalists.

³ By contrast, Austria's Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) appears to have forgotten its March tradition.

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