Church bell, remnant of Nazi era, prompts controversy in German town
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The small village of Herxheim am Berg, nestled in the hills of southern Germany, looks as picturesque and sleepy as dozens of others peeping out of lush green vineyards along the wine route in Rhineland-Palatinate.

But it has held to its chest a secret all these years, shrouded in the clock tower of its medieval church: a bell inscribed with a swastika and the name Adolph Hitler.

It has apparently been keeping time for the people of Herxheim am Berg every quarter of an hour since 1934, the year Hitler came to full power.

Nazi symbols have been banned in Germany since 1949, with some exceptions for historical artifacts.

But renewed focus on that bell with a Nazi past has prompted questions from the community, political fallout in the town and soul-searching within the church.

"Some of the new citizens who moved here later on might not know about [the bell]," said the town's former mayor Ronald Becker. "But the majority of the [town's] inhabitants have known that this bell is hanging here."

We met Becker the morning after he'd resigned his post in the midst of all the controversy over the bell's "re-discovery." He still had the key to the clock tower and agreed to take us up for a look.

Once inside, we climbed two rickety wooden ladders to get up to the belfry, disturbing a flock of indignant pigeons that took flight with a great flapping of wings, feathers flying around like snow.

The so-called "Hitler bell" hangs between two other larger bells installed in 1951, all three covered in what look to be centuries-old pigeon droppings.

"Everything For the Fatherland," reads the inscription on the bell just above Hitler's name and the swastika.

Becker said he still doesn't understand what all the fuss is about.

"The bell really should remain hanging there and should carry on doing its duty," he said. "Because we have here an historic bell."
Mayor resigns

The ex-mayor said he felt compelled to resign after being what he considers unjustly maligned in a German television documentary. He said comments he made about being proud of some of Germany's accomplishments during the Third Reich had been taken out of context, and that he had been quoting an elderly woman.

"I am actually proud of the bell like a museum director who keeps something of great value in his basement," he said. "Not because of the history."

Becker said there was a plaque in the church explaining the bell's origins, but we were not able to get into the church to view it for ourselves. In interviews with other news outlets, Becker is quoted as saying he didn't want a plaque for fear the church would become a shrine for neo-Nazis.

The whistleblower in the affair who wrote to a local newspaper about the bell's presence is a retired teacher and part-time organist named Sigrid Peters who lives one village over.

"It bothered me that other people just like me hear the beautiful ringing of church bells and don't have a clue that there is a swastika on it, that it's a Hitler bell," she said.

"Because bells have something to proclaim. Bells hanging in churches have something to proclaim. There are wonderful bible quotes written on them."

Instead, said Peters, the bells delivered Hitler's call.

"I am rather shocked that, up to now, the management of the national church did not bring itself to set an example and distance itself from this bell. The Protestant church has as yet failed to do that."

Some parts of the Protestant Church in Germany embraced Nazi ideology at the time, and some critics suggest the church isn't likely to embrace any publicity about a Nazi bell today.

The same could be said for the town. After Peters wrote a letter to the newspaper, she received a number anonymous threats, one serious enough for her to report it to the police.

"I want to silence [the bell]," she said. Peters doesn't wish to see it destroyed, she said, but to make sure it doesn't ring and that it doesn't hang anywhere without proper explanation.
The recent debate in the United States over confederate statues has prompted many to look to Germany’s example of dealing with a dark past. Few countries in the world have confronted a troubled history as profoundly and as doggedly.

But Peters believes there is still work to be done.

"I believe that the historical reappraisal by far has not been finished."

Capital of memory

The German capital, Berlin, could be described as the world's capital of memory. Its memorial to the estimated 6 million Jews murdered by the Nazis sits within sight of the German Reichstag, impossible to ignore.

And the city is peppered with museums and plaques and memorials, all with painstaking explanations.

"There is no way to escape the fact that this has been the centre of the Nazi terror machine," said analyst Josef Jenning. "It was done from this city, and this city will tell you in a number of ways it was here where it happened."

One of the latest exhibitions to deal with Germany's Nazi past is called "Hitler, How Could it Happen?" set in an old air-raid shelter.

It offers a historical journey starting with the conditions in Germany that helped pave the way for Hitler's rise to power, and culminates in a recreation of the bunker where he committed suicide.

Some critics have accused the privately funded exhibition of "normalizing" Hitler by presenting the way he lived in the bunker.

Confronting history

Managing director Enno Lenze disagrees, saying any historical exploration of Hitler is sensitive in Germany.

Like Sigrid Peters, he says the confrontation with history must continue head-on.

"People always say we're a democracy, nothing like that could happen again, we're well educated. That's exactly what the people of Germany thought in the 20s and in the 30s when the Nazis gain power."
He also says he's sometimes surprised at how little German students know about their history, despite the emphasis of school curriculum.

"It often starts with explaining that the Nazis put the Jews in the gas chambers and not vice versa," he said of some tours.

Lenze sees no argument in favour of keeping the Hitler bell at St Jakob's church. He suggests melting it down and making it into a statue of someone who fought the Nazis.

"I think no democrat and no anti-fascist will keep a bell [essentially] saying 'Heil Hitler.'"

Analyst Joseph Janning says the ability to feel good about Germany again comes courtesy of the country's post-war emphasis on facing the past.

But it makes recent gains amongst far right groups especially worrying.

"One has to keep dealing with it," said teacher Rainer Seefeld, who makes a point of taking his high school history class to visit and clean the gravestones of some of the Nazi regime's victims. "And it's the same with the bell. Take it down. Put it in a museum. Talk about it. But don't ring it."

In the end the bell has been silenced.

The day after we visited Herxheim am Berg and climbed the clock tower, the church announced they'd taken a decision they'd previously insisted was the town council's to make.

The bell will ring no more. Whether it will remain in its nest in the belfry along with the pigeons, be moved to a museum, given a new plaque or simply destroyed is not clear.

Sigrid Peters will be watching.

"I believe one must be on high alert," she said.