

EXPOSE ON THE REFORM PROCESS OF THE VOLKSBUNDⁱ

Summary and Challenges

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[German War Graves Commission]

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I.

The Volksbund is faced with important challenges.

70 years after the end of World War II, the last members of the survivor generation are slowly leaving us. The Volksbund and its work are primarily characterised by this generation. By constructing and caring for German war gravesites abroad – until 1990 in the west and thereafter also in Eastern Europe - plus their communal approach and a distinct care for the relatives, the Volksbund created a protected public space for individuals to mourn for fallen or missing soldiers or those who died in captivity. For decades hundreds of thousands of members, committed voluntary members and donors carried the workload in the face of the millions of dead– both contextually and financially

The nineteen-fifties saw the start of an international youth project that is committed under the motto “*Versöhnung über den Gräbern – Arbeit für den Frieden / Reconciliation across Graves – Working for Peace*“. Over the years this has developed into a recognised youth and educational project. Experiences gained from this work have created increasing reform pressure in the past 15 years – emanating from some state associations. It is reflected in two commissions which had been working on reforms for years: The Strategy and Structure Commission (SSK) and the “Hannemann-Commission” named after the long-time Vice President and acting chairman Volker Hannemann.

The first focused on streamlining the entire organisation. As a result, the structures and resource demands were reorganised, whereby personnel positions were given “Job and

work catalogues” (ATK). At the same time austerity measures were introduced, partly resulting in significant medium-term reductions in personnel (“target structure”). This process of reorganisation was essentially completed in 2013, whereby the goal of reducing personnel continues.

The Hannemann-Commission devotes itself more to questions of context and made 89 recommendations that were adopted by the Bundesvertretertag (members’ meeting) in the fall of 2012. The main result of this reform was the fundamental decision that education and youth work, accepted as being the future tasks, were now equal to the physical care of war graves, the construction and maintenance of war gravesites which had been the core tasks until then. Various working groups and a steering committee were to further develop and promote this reform process.

II.

For years the Volksbund has known that with the loss of the survivor generation the finances from donations, member contributions and estates will structurally be reduced to such an extent by the end of the decade that the work can no longer be financed without significant grants from public funds.

This was partially covered by several increases in funds from the Federal budget. However, this has so far not been done on an ongoing basis even though the decision-makers in the Foreign Office are aware that in future a further increase in funds will also be required.

When I took office as President of the Volksbund in October 2013, I entered a very contradictory situation:

So, for example, a reconstruction plan with a course of saving and job reduction measures had been initiated that also contradicted the contextual and basic realignment which had been adopted (recommendations of the Hannemann Commission). Staff had been significantly reduced in the past few years especially in the area of education and youth work. However, it was exactly this work that was supposed to be a focus of expansion within the adopted realignment in order to make it sustainable in the future.

However, following the recommendations of the Hannemann Commission, three important measures could be implemented in the past two years:

- (1) Establishing a department responsible for the culture of remembrance and networking in Berlin,
- (2) Hiring a press secretary in Berlin as a first step towards better public awareness and
- (3) Establishing competency centres in the youth and educational work and thus implementing an essential structural reform step in this area.

My propositions are:

A – The Volksbund's work will **only be financed with public funds in future**. This is also justified because we are fulfilling a public mandate. At the same time we should continue to try and secure as high a proportion of donations and voluntary commitments as possible.

B – In order to convince politicians to come up with these funds, our work must be realigned and reformed. **Reorganisation and reform require money**. The funds that are currently still being made available to us from donations and through estates, give us time and opportunity to take these steps.

A large portion of this **short-term surplus** (from estates) must be used as an **investment in the future**, for necessary structural realignment. Using this surplus to cover foreseeable budget deficits (medium-term financial planning) will not save the Volksbund.

C – The time given must be used to prepare future public funding. As important as they are, discussions behind closed doors are not sufficient here. What is necessary instead is a **launch into the 21st century that the public is aware of, increased recognition by the next generation and a new alignment of the Volksbund that is not only declared but noticeably being carried out**.

III.

During the radical change the Volksbund is currently experiencing, the **realignment must be based on fundamentally critical propositions**. The aim is to create a new way of commemorating German soldiers and civilians who died in the war in a changing society as well and anchoring this in the centre of society. Here it is necessary to **win over all post-war generations**, in particular also the young and middle generations.

For this to succeed, the **term war grave caretaking** must be broadly understood: Three tasks are inextricably linked

- a) The **care and maintenance of graves** of all who died in the war or violently– those of **soldiers and civilians**.
- b) The war gravesites must be developed into places of **public commemoration**.
- c) Because these authentic places speak for themselves less and less, they must be developed through **historic-political education and youth work**.

Since the cemeteries are used increasingly less often as places of individual mourning, it is necessary to create the conditions for **learning and public commemoration** through offering a **range of information**.

IV.

For a long time the graves of German soldiers were the centre of the Volksbund's work. To date, the priority was looking for and identifying fallen soldiers in order to inform the families. Contrary to earlier plans, the reburial work in Eastern Europe will have to be continued for much longer than a decade. This was also resolved by the Board in the spring of 2016.

With the departure of the survivor generation it is now important to **also include the other groups of victims** in the work in accordance with the stipulations of the law governing graves.

Due to the priority to identify fallen soldiers and being able to tell the elderly relatives where their loved one has found a worthy grave, the Volksbund predominately looked for soldiers who had fallen in battle because the chance of identifying them by their dog tags was greater. In doing so, the large number of soldiers who died in prisoner of war camps in the Soviet Union was not considered as important. The usual memorial solution in Eastern Europe does not **state the names of the German prisoners of war who died** – unlike those of fallen soldiers.

This “double standard” is problematic and has to be rethought for the future. Here a concept has to be developed and talks held with politicians because such an expansion of the current practice cannot be financed with donations.

Various steps on the path to developing such a concept have already been initiated:

- A **model project in Yaroslavl**. Here regional research groups are checking what insights can still be gained from the sources opened up on site. At the same time, the local authorities' willingness to cooperate in the development of decentralised memorial solutions is of major importance. Similar projects have begun for **Belarus** and the **Ukraine**, in order to take account of the different archival and political situations there as well.
- A **conference in December 2016 with international experts** in cooperation with the German-Russian Museum in Karlshorst should evaluate the findings on German prisoners of war and find practical solutions of commemoration.
- Afterwards a **working group** will probably be given the task to develop a **concept for a memorial to the German prisoners of war**.

V.

Aside from the soldiers, the **millions of civilians** who died in the two World Wars should also be looked at. To date we still know far too little about the graves of these civilians, who **also have the right to a permanent resting place**. With regard to war gravesites in Germany, the respective communities are responsible, but they are strongly supported by us with advice. However, there are also thousands lying in our own cemeteries abroad that have hardly been noticed, identified and marked. This is a task we should set ourselves.

At the end of the war, hundreds of thousands of German civilians from the new Soviet power block (in particular Rumania, Upper Silesia), including the Russian occupied zone in Germany, were dragged off to forced labour camps. These **German internees** have so far been outside of our horizon, even though they are part of our area of responsibility.

Targeted research of Russian archives should yield new findings not least on the question of the location of the graves of those killed there. On the basis of these results new decisions will have to be made on how we can commemorate this group of victims as well.

In order to highlight the fact that civilians are also part of our area of responsibility, we have chosen **“Flight and Expulsion”** as the **annual topic** for 2016. Here we are also providing financial support toward the construction of the refugee museum being created in **Varde/Oksbøl (Denmark)**, which commemorates the around 250,000 mostly German refugees to Denmark in the post-war years. Our aim is to build a relationship of structured cooperation with this partner.

VI.

The importance of the First World War in shaping the entire 20th century only regained public awareness in Germany in 2014. In Western Europe on the other hand, cemeteries from the First World War play a central role in the memory of the nation. There is a view and a chance that **UNESCO** will include these in its **World Heritage Sites**, which could result in a stronger awareness of them in society and beyond the countries' borders.

The situation with **war gravesites from the First World War in Eastern Europe** is completely different. According to the war grave conventions, we are also responsible for these (except Poland); however, we are completely overtaxed and also do not have a concept for this. In the course of realigning our tasks and financing them, it is important to also find a concept for this issue which is acceptable to the respective partner country. Here it is important to first clarify our own interests and settle with the government what type of financing they are prepared to make available.

VII.

Especially in countries like Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus it became an important practice in the last two decades that the Volksbund not only create its own German war gravesites, but also commemorate the **victims of the others** – the **fallen soldiers of the former enemy countries as well as the victims of German crimes**. The only example mentioned here are the significant contributions for Russian military cemeteries in Volgograd and Rzhev. The Volksbund also became the major supporter of the still expanding **“Riga Committee”** – an associations of more than 50 German cities – to commemorate the Jews deported from Germany and murdered in Riga; it has also declared its willingness to make a financial

contribution to the memorial solution for the hundreds of thousands of victims in **Trostenez near Minsk**.

This practice should be continued. It stems from the realisation that German war gravesites abroad could only be created on the basis of the **respective country's willingness to reconcile**. We still depend on that today – and not only where collective graveyards are supposed to be built, like in the Balkans.

Last year, the Federal President referred to the **Soviet prisoners of war as victims of National Socialism** in a very special way. While this group of victims has attracted too little attention in the German memorial culture so far, it has already played an important role in the Volksbund's youth work for years. Now the Volksbund has assumed a project on behalf of the German Government which together with Russia, Belarus and the Ukraine as well as other post-Soviet states should see a continuation of an earlier search for data on Soviet prisoners of war and bring this topic to completion, if possible. During this **project with the universal goal of "collecting the data on Soviet and German prisoners of war and internees and making this data accessible"**, the **Volksbund** works with the **German Office, the tracing service of the German Red Cross on the German side and the German Historical Institute in Moscow**. The Foreign Office is seeking to place this project on a bilateral basis with the respective partner. It began with a joint declaration of the Russian and German foreign ministers on 22 June 2016 during the 75th anniversary of the invasion of the Soviet Union.

Following earlier activities, the Volksbund will assume or develop a dimension of **"caring for the relatives" of Soviet prisoners of war** in order to make this project more effective socially and publicly.

VIII.

The war gravesites will lose their significance when the mourning survivor generation dies unless we succeed in **anchoring them once again in the centre of society as places of history through public commemoration and historic-political educational work**.

"War cemeteries are great preachers of peace." This quote by Albert Schweitzer has been one of the Volksbund's often quoted mottos for a long time – and it should stay this way. However, the immediate impression is that this motto does not develop by itself. The generation of today will only **talk about war graves if information and documentation is provided**. Included here are explaining the historical contexts, the experience of war while not forgetting the consequences of the war for the people of enemy countries at the time. In addition, there should be a differentiation among the dead in cemeteries by giving visitors an understanding with selected individual biographies where possible.

Reviving the topic of cemeteries and giving the dead a face requires great effort and is very time-consuming and expensive. It will only be possible in selected cemeteries where public awareness is probable. There are a variety of instruments that range from traditional exhibitions, fliers and publications to web presences and other modern communication methods. In 2015, the Volksbund started a model project for Langemark in an often visited

cemetery in Flanders: a **digital exhibition** with which much more information can be offered on the site itself but also when preparing a visit than a display of storyboards could do on its own. A larger project initially from 2016 to 2019 should “revive the awareness” of important cemeteries.

In France and Belgium (Flanders), the 100th anniversary of the First World War led to a multitude of new initiatives to make the public aware of war gravesites. Only the **new design of the memorial site “Notre-Dame de Lorette”** was mentioned, where all the names are listed alphabetically and not separately by countries; or even the project in France and Belgium, in which the Volksbund will now also participate, to develop 100 cemeteries of different countries involved in the First World War into a **linked cultural landscape in northern France and Flanders** and receive the title **UNESCO World Heritage Site** for this.

In both projects, the Volksbund provided important preliminary work. We will get involved more strongly in such initiatives both conceptually and as a co-design partner, as it is already happening with the **French-German Museum on the Hartmannsweilerkopf**.

IX.

Reforming and realigning the Volksbund’s work must be thought through conceptually and supported scientifically. Years ago in 2005, the Volksbund already established a Scientific Board and sought advice from it on selected issues. Now the scientific support is to be significantly expanded. The field of work is large. It involves the demonstration of historical connections, issues of different cultures of remembrance, public commemoration, preparing and participating in events and conferences as well as designing exhibitions and publications. In order to do justice to this multitude of tasks, a **Scientific Board** was appointed in 2015 which is clearly more extensive and internationally organised.

X.

Over decades, the Volksbund created a **protected public space for millions of relatives to personally mourn for fallen and missing soldiers and those who died in captivity**. In doing so, it did not really allow itself to be affected by the sometimes heated social debates on how to present and evaluate National Socialism, on blame and responsibility – and did not participate in them. It only integrated certain aspects of these debates into its work and did so hesitantly. If the Volksbund wants to win the following generations for the task of caring for war graves, it may not refuse to heed these debates! Rather, it has to see itself as **part of the German historic-political commemorative culture** and **actively get involved in the public debates on commemorative policies in Germany**.

The design of the **central memorial celebration on Remembrance Day** is the Volksbund’s responsibility. Here we are increasingly also adding current issues. It is important to fill Remembrance Day with new life and bring it close to the younger generation also on this level.

The culture of remembrance is quite fractured in society in Germany and often not well integrated. Some are busy working on a reappraisal of National Socialism, some of communism, and others of flight and expulsion. Commemorating the World Wars has only become a topic again because of the last anniversaries. However, this is where the Volksbund should get involved and gain recognition. This should be done with **an integrated approach**, with which the various dimensions of the **experiences of the 20th century (world wars and totalitarian dictatorship) are correlated with each other**.

After the debates of the past decades, Germany's **admission of guilt and responsibility** during the time of national socialism and the reappraisal of crimes have become a firm part of the national culture of remembrance. Public commemoration can only take place on the basis of the values held by us today and also has to critically deal with the darker side of our past. Before this backdrop it is an important task to have the conversation on how we can commemorate the German soldiers in the Second World War adequately and honourably today. The political decision-makers in the Federal Republic of Germany have so far not found a general language here and find it difficult to visit German war gravesites abroad during international visits. There are still questions that we need to ask ourselves!

With a new **department in Berlin "Culture of remembrance and networking work"**, the Volksbund has begun to set itself this task.

The goal must be to position oneself as a **recognised actor in the culture of remembrance and commemoration in Germany and Europe** and add a dimension of the experience of war and its consequences. Like the **memorial sites** of the totalitarian dictatorships, war gravesites should be seen as **authentic places of remembrance** in school and education policies. This also applies to the conception and design of memorial places by the German government and the states.

XI.

Today we are more aware than before that **today public commemoration is increasingly set in an international context**. Our own history is closely linked to that of our neighbours whereby they all have their own perspective. Wherever we build and care for war gravesites and create our memorials we must be conscious of the experiences of the respective society with us Germans and their culture of remembrance. **Remembering through dialogue** must become a stronger part of our work.

Therefore we have started a series of events in Berlin **"Culture of remembrance in dialogue"** in cooperation with the embassies of other countries.

Together with our partner in France, the ONAC, we have taken the initiative to invite other European war graves services. As a result, a **"Contact group of war grave services in Europe"** was established in October 2015 in Niederbronn. The next meeting of the war grave services, which continue to expand, will be held in October 2016 in Belgium

Since 2015, the Volksbund has been the joint host of the annual “Seminar on International East-West European Memorial Sites” in Kreisau.

Already on the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the European countries in East and West started to remember the horrors of the war together. The European Parliament has launched initiatives and programmes since 2004 to promote the European dialogue on reappraising the history of the 20th century. Various activities and institutions are now also receiving money from the **funds of the European Commission**. The Volksbund must endeavour to position itself in the EU as a conceptual and professional partner who will then also gain access to such programmes.

It will have to be seen in which way our offices abroad (France, Poland, Russia), which have so far essentially assumed tasks in the context of building and caring for collective cemeteries as well as reburials, should be entrusted with tasks of education and commemoration.

XII.

Since 1953 the Volksbund has been working with young people at war cemeteries under the motto “Versöhnung über den Gräbern - Arbeit für den Frieden / *Reconciliation across the Graves – Working for Peace*”. Over many years, the numerous **international youth exchanges/work camps** that take place across Europe have developed into a trademark. In five youth exchanges and places of education situated next to large cemeteries, historic-political education programmes for peace and democracy take place with which we reach almost 20,000 young people annually. Since 2008, the Volksbund has also been recognised as a sponsor of political education. This work, which is also significantly supported by the state associations, has won the Volksbund several prizes (2014 Award of the Peace of Westphalia, 2015 Prize of the Weimar Triangle, National Prize 2016).

Despite this extensive recognition, there is also a need for significant reforms and investments here. In 2015 a large structural reform was decided on in order to make the international youth work more professional and strengthen school work on state level (establishing competency centres for the cooperation of federal offices and state associations, main and voluntary).

The places of youth exchanges and education must be expanded and developed into conference and educational sites, so that they can also be used by the middle generations in future. This is happening in Golm where building measures have been resolved for Niederbronn.

At the same time it is important that the Volksbund is firmly anchored in society in the respective region through its youth exchange and education sites.

In future, the Volksbund should also become involved in the Voluntary Programme of the Federal Government (FSJ) and also use the **opportunities of the “European voluntary services”**. A concept for this is being generated.

XIII.

While the Volksbund has good offers for the survivor generation of the war and also for young people so that they can design the memorials of war and violence with us or are introduced to this topic, there are hardly any offers for the **middle generation**. This is a challenge that we still do not give enough attention. A project we started in that area in 2015 is the offer of **educational travel**. This work still needs to be intensified and developed.

Experience shows that there is great potential here because there definitely is a social interest. At the same time it can be assumed that such an involvement would carry itself once it had been developed and introduced. This age group is prepared and in a position to finance such offers and break even.

XIV.

The Volksbund is federally organised, the state associations play a central role. While the work camps have so far been organised on state level, the focus since 2016 is schoolwork. Some state associations have assumed a lead role here and **firmly established schoolwork as pedagogic work towards peace and democracy**.

In several countries it proved successful for schools to use actual war gravesites via the Volksbund as part of their learning; they are also provided with learning material. So far, such practices and the corresponding material are still not very well known beyond their own region. On federal level, the Volksbund also does not have an accessible overview of such projects, which after all could act as stimulus for the other regions.

The Act governing graves in the Federal Republic of Germany describes in Section 1 (1) the duty to “commemorate the victims of war and tyranny in a special manner and keep the memory of the horrible consequences of war and tyranny alive for future generations”. The Volksbund takes on this task on state level with its school and educational work, with exhibitions and by making learning material on uncovered war grave sites available. By establishing the centre of competency, resources are freed especially for the smaller state associations to intensify this work.

Another essential task of the Volksbund on state **level is advising communities in all matters of designing war gravesites**. If this task is not also financed by the states and communities, it will not be possible to perform it in future. However, this would mean that a lot of competence will be lost. In future, our approach to the **local associations** must be more targeted and we must encourage the states and communities to finance the consultation and support.

XV.

The Volksbund's work is only possible through **reliable partnerships** with the Bundeswehr [German armed forces], reservists and associations that uphold traditions with street collections, work groups at cemeteries and by supporting work camps. In addition, churches and communities are also important partners during commemoration celebrations on Remembrance Day. This cooperation must be maintained and nurtured.

Furthermore, it is important to also get involved in the networks of the cultures of remembrance and educational work and become a recognised partner here that contributes its own profile.

XVI.

Throughout its long history, the Volksbund has essentially been **supported by voluntary commitments**. Even though the number of members has decreased significantly, the aim must be to maintain this character in the future as well.

At the same time, a large pool of full-time employees ensures that the work is done professionally. Through ongoing training as well as by hiring new qualified employees we must adapt to new challenges and put ourselves into the position that enables us to deal with them.

It should be investigated how the procedures between government offices and state associations can be designed to be more flexible and simpler. Here the possibilities presented by IT systems should also be used more effectively.

XVII.

Not only because of its name, but also because of the time gap since the World Wars, the Volksbund is seen by society, if people know it at all, as an organisation that is not up-to-date. Even though many elderly people still remember the street collections, the care of soldier cemeteries and the work done with relatives, very few know about the extensive youth and educational work. The public is hardly aware that looking for graves, establishing people's fate and burying victims of war still endure to this day.

A key task of securing the Volksbund's future is to **profile** the Volksbund's extensive work **and create an awareness of it among the public**. This requires a **professional and coherent communication strategy for the public media**.

Another step was taken with the **first annual reception in Berlin in February 2016** to show public presence in the country's capital.

XVIII.

This exposé summarises the results of the various endeavours and resolutions on reform and places them in an internal context. Much has been started much still needs to be done. **It must be noted: Only with consistent and continued implementation of the reform process will the Volksbund gain the necessary recognition in politics and from the public which is needed to ensure future sustainability.**

In order to be able to continue the Volksbund's work even without the donations from the survivor generation, it will become necessary in the near future for **finances to be provided mainly by public funds**, in particular the national budget. There are already talks in progress with the Foreign Office on how the Volksbund and its work can be placed on a secure foundation. The federal states for which we perform important tasks are also part of the responsibility here. Fortunately, the **Presidents of the Land Parliaments** described this task very clearly in their **resolution** taken in **June 2016** "Assuming joint responsibility for maintaining the culture of remembrance and supporting the valuable work of the Volksbund Deutscher Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V. [German War Graves Commission]".

First talks have started in the past few weeks, so that a **new Bundestag resolution on the Volksbund and its future** can be taken in the German Bundestag in the fall of this year (for the first time since 2002).