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The Bitburg Controversy from the New Cold War Perspective: Reagan's Views on WWII Nazi Germany's Soldiers' Victimhood

Why to go back to 1985 to discuss present-day key concerns of international relations from the perspective of World War II history during the Cold War? The May 5, 1985 Bitburg cemetery celebrations, when US president altogether with German chancellor (Helmut Kohl) paid tribute to WWII veterans (of both sides of the conflict) was an example of the Ronald Reagan administration's public relations fiasco: the "Great Communicator" failed to refer to WWII history in a manner that would save him from harsh criticism. Importantly, the 1985 debate concerning the Bitburg ceremony and the moral aspects of a homage to German (Axis) WWII soldiers gave an incentive to "*Historikerstreit*" in Germany, a dispute regarding WWII history in a manner comparable to Holocaust responsibility as a collective burden carried by Germans. The Bitburg cemetery, since the 1930s a monument (Kolmeshöhe Ehrenfriedhof) to WWI German military victims, and then to their younger colleagues during WWII (Wehrmacht and, controversially, Waffen-SS) remained a broadly commented upon focal point of Cold War disputes, allowing such questions that might bring about a possibility of ground-breaking change in present-day political rivalries caused by failed (or successful) Cold War propaganda related to WWII choices. The Bitburg case presents itself as a particularly illustrative one and could also shed more light on the post-Soviet Russian effort to increase its influence by relying on the myths of the "Great Patriotic War".

Key words: Cold War propaganda related to WWII, Reagan's public relations, US alliance with Germany, memory politics, Holocaust remembrance

Introduction

Among the top issues concerning the present-day New Cold War is Vladimir Putin's propaganda relying on the "Great Patriotic War" and depicting all his foes as fascists, not mentioning how close to fascism his own regime stands. Still, among

the factors that should be taken into consideration in the “New Cold War” debates is how important the dark legacy of the Nazis was in the US-Soviet rivalry in comparison to the 2010s (since Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014) Russian challenge to the West. To describe and analyse such a problem, this article goes back to the most significant debate on the understanding of WWII in the 1980s, the one related to Reagan’s 1985 Bitburg speech. The examination of such a case, on the doorstep of the gradual end of the Cold War could shine a brighter light on the meaning of the disputes of the 2010s and 2020s regarding WWII history in the contemporary Russian challenge to the West, relying primarily on historical accounts of key contributions towards the defeat of Hitler. The weakening of the anti-Nazi stance in the West could be linked to Bitburg and Reagan’s conclusions on the “victimhood” of the soldiers of Nazi Germany.

Bitburg demise

The US Department of State Bureau of Intelligence and Research conclusions (classified as the Bowman-Miller report) from June 1985 summarize the Bitburg cemetery visit as a costly fiasco and a faulty step in a wrong direction. German chancellor Kohl was leading his country and the US as its ally towards continuous and persistent (morally dubious and fallacious) efforts to alleviate the guilt for Nazi war crimes from the shoulders of Germans (Miller ii, 3-4). The Department’s Bowman-Miller conclusions from Bitburg provide evidence of the reconciliation Germany was seeking (with former WWII enemies and with the West), which was making progress but could not be felicitated by the German side and its initiatives, particularly events like the stubbornness of Kohl at Bitburg (Miller 10).

On his part, Reagan explained that after he accepted Kohl’s invitation to visit West Germany after the Bonn economic summit in 1985 to conclude a meeting that would commemorate the 40th anniversary of the end of WWII and discuss reconciliation patterns between the US and Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) on the basis of the “former enemies – today’s friends” approach, he turned down an invitation to visit the Dachau concentration camp, citing the expectation of a formal itinerary on behalf of his administration (Reagan, *An American...* 376). Reagan also complained that Jewish organizations in Germany made the visit hard for him, as they demanded his presence in Dachau and revealed the fact (as he claimed, unknown to him during the early stages of the planning of the visit) that there were graves of SS officers in the cemetery that was eventually finalized as the point of initiation of new German-American friendship (Reagan, *An American...* 376). In his memoirs, Reagan mentions that the Bitburg dispute became a “Dreyfus” case for his administration, stressing that he made it clear to Elie Wiesel (after being criticized for the Bitburg idea) that he wanted him to accompany the president in Germany, but the Jewish leader refused to go to the controversial cemetery (Reagan, *An American...* 378). In the context of his wife’s argumentation that he should not go to Bitburg, Reagan confessed that in his view there was no reason to hold all Germans responsible for the Holocaust, so he thought it would be best to relieve present-day Germans from that responsibility. He said: “I didn’t think it was right to keep on punishing every German for the Holocaust, including generations not yet born in the time of Hitler.

I don't think all Germans deserve to bear the stigma for everything he did" (Reagan, *An American...* 380). Confessing that he never changed his mind on the visit to Bitburg, Reagan concluded that he was pleased to have made it a center of US-German friendship and valued most the benefits the reconciliatory military exchange brought to American alliances in Europe, in light of Germany and its military force (Reagan, *An American...* 384). Reagan was so self-confident and stubborn (while being ill continuously) that he summarized the Bitburg visit in a 1988 interview as an opportunity he used to bring to America a lesson from the German society on how to preserve the memory of the Holocaust saying: "I thought it was very worthwhile, and I came home with a message also for our own people. I think the courage of your country in maintaining those evidences of the horror of the Holocaust and bringing your own young people in to see them so that this can never happen again – I think this is something that you have every reason to be proud of" (Reagan, *Interview...*). Similarly, he spoke about Bitburg in 1985 summarizing his visit and stating that this place (monument of SS) was proof that the Germans did well in preserving evidence of the concentration camps and exposing their children for them to learn of the Holocaust so that it could never happen again (Reagan, *The President's...*).

Deborah Lipstadt explained that the source of the "Bitburg affair" lay within Helmut Kohl's frustration about him not being invited to take part in the 40th anniversary of D-Day, which he shared with a number of European leaders, including French president Mitterand who offered the German chancellor shared participation in the WWI Verdun cemetery celebration and reconciliation. Kohl wanted to share a similar experience with Reagan, inviting him in 1984 to visit a German cemetery and Reagan quickly agreed without any official consultations with his administration on the matter (Lipstadt 21-22). The plan to visit Bitburg released by the White House on April 11, 1985 was criticized by leading figures of the American Jewish community and organizations, including the chairman of the US Holocaust Memorial Council Elie Wiesel (Lipstadt 24). Lipstadt also mentions that the Bitburg celebration with Reagan triggered anti-Semite demonstrations in Germany (Lipstadt 37). The Nordrhein Westfallen service remembers that the Bitburg Kolmeshöhe Cemetery ("Ehrenfriedhof", honorary cemetery) visit of Kohl and ("his comrade") Reagan was controversial for Jews due to SS troopers buried there but brought about huge mass demonstration of supporters. As the cemetery service noted: "thousands came to welcome their Chancellor and his comrade during this historical visit" ("Eifel Tourismus", *Kolmeshöhe Cemetery Bitburg*).

Karl Figlio saw Reagan's visit to Bitburg in 1985 (a prelude to *Historikerstreit* or the historians debate in Germany on the Holocaust's centrality) as a tribute to German WWII veterans and "freedom fighters" in the early campaign against communism and assessed that common celebrations of both SS-troopers (as soldiers of freedom) and Holocaust victims brought about an equivalence between those two groups, relieving Germany (as SS-affiliated group, or SS-derivative) from any debt towards the Jewish victims of Nazi crimes due to the role of the SS in fighting communism from the Cold War perspective, in this highly controversial narrative (Figlio 126). Jeffrey Olick noted that Reagan's concept of the 40th anniversary of the end of WWII including a visit to Bitburg and speeches aimed to relieve young Germans from the sense of unnecessary guilt, without a plan to visit a concentration camp, later the plan was corrected in favor of such a visit (Olick 72-75).

The crimes of the Wehrmacht – murdering civilians and participating in Holocaust in Eastern Europe – itself during WWII were not fully revealed in public or clearly known to the broader public before the famous 1995 exhibition, due to a myth of knightly armed forces not engaged in war crimes or genocidal policies of Germany during the war (Eggleston). Arleen Ionescu saw the Bitburg visit as an attempt to normalize the issues of history under the conservative administrations of Kohl and Reagan (Ionescu 30). According to J. H. Lim, after the establishment of the system of the Cold War, history and memory of dictatorships could be free of the perspective that necessitates including both sides of the conflict as indispensable in a struggle between good and evil, where evil is necessary so that the fight could take place). It is this “Manichean” context that he saw as a key prerequisite or a “trigger” for the German dispute of historians over the memory of the Holocaust in the 1980s (Lim 434). Rodden explained that the Black Book – detailing Germany’s experience of dictatorship, Nazism, and communism – by Courtois of the 1990s had some follow-on themes along with Nolte’s *Historikerstreit* stance (Rodden 151).

In Bitburg in May 1985, Reagan fathomed that his speech was about to bring a spirit of reconciliation, similar to an earlier ceremony with generals Ridgway and Steinhoff, and unite US and German soldiers, leaving the spirits of the past conflict to rest. The visit to Bergen-Belsen on the same day was mentioned as well to honour the victims of the Holocaust, “which should not be forgotten ever”, the US president stressed (Reagan, *Remarks at...*). At the time Reagan believed, as did many others, that Wehrmacht soldiers were not guilty of the Holocaust as according to him they were but innocent boys (Reagan, *Remarks at...*). Reagan attempted to distinguish between the Third Reich and the German people who paid the price for its crimes, like they were separate bodies and did not consider the question of mass support for Hitler in the German society at the time (Reagan, *Toast...*). He harked back to 1832 and 1848 to present Germans as heroes of freedom, certainly to get more support in the American negotiations with the USSR (Reagan, *Remarks to...*).

As it appears, Reagan had no intention to honour Holocaust victims during the 1985 visit to Germany: he refused to go to Dachau, self admittedly (Reagan, *Remarks and...*). On the contrary, he wanted to play the German card (against the Soviets) by saying that the Bitburg Wehrmacht boys were victims just the same as the Holocaust victims, which led to a public outcry by the Jewish community in America asking Reagan to change his schedule and itinerary of his visit to Germany (Jewish Virtual Library). Shultz confirmed that Reagan wanted to skip Dachau while visiting Germany so that the visit would “be positive and forward looking” (Shultz Loc 10993).

It was as early as April 1985 that Reagan knew about almost 30 SS graves in Bitburg, but his focus remained on emphasizing the innocence of 3000 eighteen-year-old German conscripts enlisted in the final days of the Third Reich as an American gesture of sympathy towards Kohl and Germany, while underlining that those young German soldiers were victims of the Nazi government (Reagan, *Remarks and...*). On April 19, 1985, Elie Wiesel called upon Reagan to not go to Bitburg in a public ceremony while accepting the congressional medal (Pfefferkorn 198; Wiesel). Jonathan Keller, relying on Lou Cannon, thought Wiesel’s speech was the only element of pressure concerning Bitburg the president was willing to take under consideration but his stubbornness prevailed, and he wanted to hear no voices of dissent (Keller

482; Cannon 578). According to Lou Cannon, Bitburg may have proven Reagan's lack of historical understanding (Farnham 243; Cannon 587).

George Shultz also mentions in his account the 82:0 Senate vote against Reagan visiting Bitburg particularly after Weisel's speech, and a similar negative vote in the House, but at the same time the majority of the Christian Democrats in the Bundestag urged the US Congress not to cancel the visit, with Alfred Dregger calling such a step an insult to his late brother — a German soldier — who died fighting Bolshevism on the Eastern front (Shultz Loc 11131, 11170, 11183-11208). Among the sponsors of the Senate's call to cancel Bitburg was Republican Bob Dole (subsequent presidential candidate) who emphasized that the visit would not be perceived as paying homage to US WWII casualties combating the Nazis but vice versa (*Los Angeles Times*, *80 Senators...*). The House's letter to Kohl signed by 257 out of 435 representatives issued before the Senate's call asked the German chancellor to stop applying pressure on Reagan to go to Bitburg, but Kohl declined the plea (*The New York Times*). Soviet claims on Reagan's Nazi sympathies were dismissed by the German chancellor who proved to be most influential in his effort to counter the Soviet influence by going ahead with the Wehrmacht-embracing alliance with the US. Kohl prevailed bringing about the occurrence of the "Bitburg disaster" as the then US secretary of state described the affair to the president in a private conversation, which clearly summed up Reagan's stubborn equalizing of Nazi troopers and Holocaust victims as having an equal share in victimhood of WWII (Shultz Loc 11407). Despite protests, Reagan went to Bitburg which he saw as a common resting place for US and German soldiers (Green).

A letter from Reagan's advisor dated April 24, 1985 — as mentioned in the *Los Angeles Times* report — asked the German government to check on the possible re-scheduling of Bitburg, confirmed by Peter Boenisch, the German government spokesman, but in fact Kohl and Reagan chose not to cancel the visit (*Los Angeles Times*, *Letter...*). David Morris mentions that Secretary of State Schultz found the Bitburg case of particular importance in his later recollection of the Reagan presidency, linking the German stand on the matter and Kohl's urgency with the USSR campaign condemning Germany's revanchist attempts (and change of borders), which was presented by the Soviet side as a rationale for increased FDR economic assistance to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) since June 1983; the follow-up of the Bitburg logic ("normalcy" for Germany in place of regret due to Hitler's barbarous crimes against humanity) could be George H. W. Bush's declaration of "partnership in leadership" between the US and Germany since 1989 (Morris 94, 96-97, 104). In a discussion with Morris, Mark Maslan explains Reagan's lack of WWII military service by likening it to myopia and not some American unwillingness to serve in Europe's war (Maslan 69).

Timothy Raphael interpreted the Bitburg affair (in the context of memoirs of Michael Deaver, former Deputy Chief of Staff in the Reagan administration) from the perspective of theatre studies as a fiasco of Reagan's second presidency, connected with spectres of the past that overshadowed the present era, more clearly than in any other case in the matter of the Holocaust and Bitburg itself (Raphael 12). Michael Deaver mentioned that Bitburg visit, a last part of his public relations works in the Reagan administration, was broadly seen as a failure, i.e. "there were few generous commentaries on my final official service to the presidency" (Deaver 179). Albert

Friedlander writes in the context of Bitburg that the world wants to forget the Holocaust (Friedlander 5-6). Henry Rousso notes that the French response to Bitburg might have had been important as the Waffen SS soldiers buried there were likely responsible for the Oradour-sur-Glane massacre (1944), but domestic problems of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, such as the Robert Faurisson controversy, together with the communist leadership denouncing Reagan's Nazi colloquations made Mitterand's France impotent in the matter (Rousso 52-54, 55-57, 62-64). The US side (Deaver) in April 1985 was trying to make sure that if the Bitburg-buried Waffen SS soldiers had not taken part in the Malmedy massacre of US POWs (and Germany confirmed that there were no such cases), but the Oradour matter was more difficult following the Second SS Panzer "Das Reich" Division's culpability. At the time, the war grave association from FRG had hinted that members of that division were buried in Bitburg alongside members of the 10th SS Panzer Division (Markham).

Bitburg as a failure of the "Great Communicator"

Richard Jensen described Reagan as the "great communicator", the image tarnished by his failed US-German reconciliation effort in Bitburg where he mourned the dead in the German WWII military cemetery – even more controversial to be visited immediately after a presidential visit to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Notably his speech was delivered not from the cemetery, but from the US air base in Bitburg just after his visit to the cemetery (Jensen x, 5-6, 16-19). What seemed so striking for many critics was that Reagan broke rank with his own generation in commemorating the war by joining Kohl – himself previously banned from the D-Day celebrations (Jensen 16-19).

According to Jensen, the two speeches were delivered in the midst of a controversial atmosphere in Germany even though they were written by Reagan's best speechwriters with his own inputs (Jensen x). Ritter and Henry mention that Reagan's decision to visit Bitburg lowered public confidence in the president who was also seen as unreliable by the conservatives due to his significant shift in stance from anti-Sovietism to conciliation, adding that further deterioration of presidential reliability came with the Iran-Contras affair (Ritter and Henry 62).

Peter Levy has concluded that Reagan's Bergen-Belsen visit was not enough to make it up to the Jewish community offended by his Bitburg decision and mostly by the fact that Germany was trying to undermine the significance of the Holocaust and Reagan was helping them do so, adding that Nancy Reagan was expressly against the visit to Bitburg probably prompted by Donald Regan who replaced Jim Baker as the chief of staff (Levy 41). In her writings, Elizabeth Kramer states that the idea of Reagan visiting the Bitburg cemetery came from Helmut Kohl who proposed it to his American counterpart during his 1984 visit to Washington D.C. (Kramer 68).

Further, Mark Lagon has stressed upon the fact that Reagan's speech at the Bitburg air base was aimed towards showing similarities between Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism, and emphasizing US opposition to the outcome of totalitarianism (Lagon 114). As Reagan said in Bitburg, echoing Kennedy: "I am a Berliner, I am a Jew in a world still threatened by anti-Semitism. I am an Afghan, and I am a prisoner of Gulag. I am Laotian, a Cambodian, a Cuban, and a Miskito Indian in

Nicaragua" (Reagan, *Remarks at...*). Weiler and Pearce see Bitburg among the few particularly emotional points of the Reagan presidency (Weiler and Pearce 149).

Shaller explains that the Bitburg case exploded to the level of "international embarrassment" after Kohl invited Reagan to speak on reconciliation. Michael Deaver, just before leaving the White House, gave approval to the presidential address in Bitburg and shortly after it became known that there were 47 Waffen SS buried there. Notably, Reagan was seen as downplaying their guilt and was heard later speaking on his research on the SS that apparently helped form his arguably faulty view claiming that all those killed were Nazi-era victims in equal measure. He received immense criticism even from the American Legion. Nancy Reagan, on her part, urged her husband to carry on with his visit to the Bergen-Belsen camp but cut short the Bitburg visit, with the help (apparently) of her astrologer Joan Quigley (Schaller 63). Terry Deibel has noted that Bitburg could have been relegated to the side lines as one of the fiascos of the Reagan presidency similar to the European pipeline link with USSR case, the Iranian hostage crisis or the disaster concerning marine deployment in Lebanon (Deibel 108).

Reagan's speechwriters

Gerald Boyd wrote in February 6, 1986 in *The New York Times* that there was a dispute over the ideological tone adopted by Reagan and his speechwriters, the team headed by Bentley T. Elliot, former CBS News producer and US Chamber of Commerce communications director, and comprising young writers aged between 28-38: Anthony R. Dolan (conservative, interests included foreign policy and crime, farmed out the "Evil Empire" speech); Margaret Noonan (see as more poetic); Dana Rohrabacher (later wrote a Hollywood script and sold it); Josh Gilder (adopted Clint Eastwood movie lines to aid his argument on tax increase); Peter Robinson; and Elliot himself, focusing on economics. The speechwriting team was supported by a "team of researchers" (Boyd). Peter Robinson served from 1982-1983 as chief speechwriter to the vice-president and then from 1983-1988 to Reagan himself (Witte).

Former speechwriting aide Kenneth Khachigian was still employed at the White House; he wrote a draft of Reagan's inaugural speech, the 1984 nomination acceptance speech, and the 1988 Republican National Convention farewell speech (Marinucci). The Bergen-Belsen speech became so important to the administration that Khachigian was brought in to give it some life, along with Timmons, researcher, mentioned among the draft speech staff. The air base-cemetery speech was signed by Josh Gilder (speechwriter) but the Bitburg ceremony was disturbed by Jewish activists, who demonstrated against Reagan's reconciliation with Wehrmacht and SS troopers (Nelson; Ronald Reagan Presidential Library).

Tony Dolan confessed in a Medhurst interview that he made it to the rank of chief speechwriter with an oversight over all speeches since the State of the Union in 1982 to the Westminster speech in June that year, but then the administration's higher-ranked personalities, i.e. David Gergen, James Baker, and Richard Darman isolated him and though he could get a lot of his speeches approved, he lost administrative control over the whole speechwriting process, to get it back only in 1985 or 1986 (Medhurst and Dolan 245-56).

In Douglas Brinkley's book, Reagan's secret collection of his most important pieces of political wisdom (Brinkley, Introduction) among which are (sic!) Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, and the Nazi Party – not mentioning Mussolini, Stalin or Lenin – Reagan's favourite quote from Hitler's "wisdom" was: "We shall banish want, we shall banish fear. The essence of National Socialism is human welfare rooted in a fuller life for every German from childhood to old age" (much like the Atlantic Charter) and his favourite passage from Goebbels was: "Whoever can conquer the street will conquer the state one day, for every form of power politics and any dictatorially run state has its roots in the street" (Reagan and Brinkley 96, 101; Edwards).

Summary

The Bitburg visit controversy received broad media coverage recorded by the White House. Perhaps it was a demonstration of strength after all, at the time of the Soviet-American new détente? The spirit of the mid-1980s and the final stages of the Cold War could not overwhelm an impression that for the West and the US the cost of such a compromise as in Bitburg, with Nazi Germany, to gain the upper hand in US-Soviet rivalry, was too high. In that context, the successes of Putin's "Great Patriotic War" propaganda could be better understood, as the US' most celebrated president was not able to give up on the German card, that eventually brought back the Nazi past. It could perhaps help to understand how far Putin could go in his rivalry against the West, knowing that Reagan gave a boost to new nationalism in Germany and beyond, actually most visible in Putin's Russia. Not surprisingly, giving up on the anti-Nazi stance in Bitburg did help to cement the US-German alliance, leading to a vision of "partnership in leadership" with the end of the Cold War in sight. Nevertheless, it was much too high a cost to be paid, especially since it undermined efforts to give Europe a clearly non-Nazi leadership. The question remains – could the 2010s "propaganda wars" led by Russia, built upon post-Soviet WWII mythology, be strong enough to resist Western influence in Ukraine and beyond, if the US was not strong enough to win the Cold War without Hitler's soldiers?

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