

HOW ARI CAME TO US

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Since 2009, the Korea Verband's working group 'Comfort Women' has carried out educational and public-relations work and organized political campaigns aimed at raising awareness about comfort women in Germany. Its members are from Congo, Germany, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and other countries. During the Asia-Pacific War (1931-45), the Japanese military abducted an estimated 200,000 girls and women from its colonies and occupied territories, taking them to war zones where they were forced into sexual slavery to serve the troops. It was only in 1991 that Kim Hak-soon, a survivor of the comfort women system from South Korea, broke silence on the matter publicly. More than one thousand affected women from fourteen countries followed her example and spoke out. This resulted in a global 'comfort women' movement, which continues to call for justice for these women. Since 1992, a demonstration has been held every Wednesday in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. In 2011, on the occasion of the one thousandth demonstration, the first peace statue was unveiled in Berlin. In Berlin, a lengthy process led to the installation of the Ari peace statue. The application was submitted on 19 February 2020, and approved on 6 July. The planned installation date of 14 August 2020 had to be postponed due to the construction of a drinking fountain and gas line repairs. On 10 August 2020, following an amendment, a new date was set and the unveiling was planned for World Peace Day, 21 September 2020. This date was postponed to 28 September to allow the district office to attend. The unveiling took place on that day. However, on 7 October 2020, the special permit was revoked and the statue was removed on 14 October 2020.

Why 'Ari'? In Armenian, *Ari* means 'The Brave'. The Armenian struggle for recognition of the genocide carried out by Turkey displays parallels with the activism of the comfort women movement, particularly in terms of global networking.

The rejection of the application to extend the special use of the Peace Statue from 30 September 2024 is characterized by its bureaucratic and even violent language, which obscures the commitment of Berlin's citizens. The 'Comfort Women' working group collected 3,000 signatures in the district in favour of preserving the Peace Statue, and there were five BVV resolutions in favour of preservation as well. In this process, the responsible authorities were able to acquire the community's knowledge of urban tenders for art competitions. Instead of citing foreign policy reasons (i.e., relations between Germany and Japan), the decision provisionally invokes special use laws for public space. Laws are 'invented' by the district office, such as suddenly backdated laws regarding a maximum of two years' special use for art in public space on the district office's website, which were not previously known to the public. It also claims to have proposed three alternative locations, which were allegedly rejected by the applicant; however, these locations were never communicated to the applicant.



The language used in the rejection notice is emphatically beaurocratic—‘planning authority’, ‘will of the legislature’. In contrast to a supposedly ‘universal’ interest, the Peace Statue is portrayed as a particular interest. Words like ‘tolerance’ are taken from racist migration legislation, and the idea that ‘diversity’ can only be achieved through a public competition is neoliberal language.

On the one hand, all of this refocuses attention on the perspective of the majority society, in which this topic remains relatively unknown; on the other hand, Germany’s responsibility for the Second World War is rendered invisible.

The members of the advisory committee who oversee funding decisions of the district authority eventually withdrew financing for the ‘Comfort Women’ working group’s education project. The working group has since initiated two sets of legal actions in response to both the slashing of the funding for the education project and the rejection notice.

Report by Marc Sebastian Eils

Translated from German by Colin Shepherd