

Adventures of a Germanophobe

The reunification of Germany has stirred old fears that were buried after the Nazi period. When historian Robert Darnton went to Berlin in 1989, he rediscovered layers of such anti-German fears within himself. He also discovered, as the Wall came down, a changed Germany. East Germans, far from denying their Nazi and communist past, were eager to confront it. The more the Germans challenge their past, Darnton suggests, the less anxious one can be about the German future.

by Robert Darnton

I always wished that the soldier who killed my father had been a German, but he wasn't. He was an American. It didn't even happen in Germany. It happened, in the language of wartime Washington, "somewhere in the Pacific"—actually at the Battle of Buna in Northern New Guinea on October 18, 1942. An American gunner strafed the wrong side by mistake. But I put it right in my mind simply by making it happen in Germany. I was three at the time and didn't know much about geography. Living on the East Coast, I heard about nothing but "bad people" who were all German. They had pencil mustaches, wore their hair smeared diagonally across their foreheads, and walked like geese. In my mind, I arranged it that Hitler himself had killed my father, and in my dreams I saw him coming to get me. He usually came in the window, with a knife between his teeth. I still have Nazi nightmares made up mostly of jackboots and torture chambers. Or do I? Are they really Nazis or some other species of "bad people" picked out of the trash stored in my head—death squads in Argentina, per-

haps, or even New York's finest? How can we know what seeps into the mind and settles into memories? How can we assess what we remember?

I had a chance to play with those questions just before I left for Berlin, when I ran across an article I had supposedly written, or rather dictated, at the age of four for the Sunday *New York Times Magazine*: "ROBERT, AGE 4, IN WONDERLAND. What he saw in a tour of Washington is set down here in his own language." My father had been a war correspondent for the *Times*. One of his friends, Meyer Berger, took me around the city and recorded my quasi-baby talk in order to draw a picture of wartime Washington as it appeared to a little boy. It was to be a modern version of the story about "The Emperor's New Clothes," and it made a good Sunday feature because I came up with supposedly cute comments, such as "Penny-gone" for Pentagon.

The cuteness has worn off by now, but I find the article disturbing, because as a four-year-old I apparently spoke the words that appear in it. Meyer Berger, who took them down in shorthand, was famous for

the accuracy and integrity of his reporting. In reading those words printed under the byline "by Robert Darnton as recorded by Meyer Berger," I can know what I said 46 years ago, a year after my father's death. I can step into a stream of consciousness that had disappeared into the lower strata of my mind and dive into a world that had been completely inaccessible—unless I could have reached it by a long and painful detour from a psychoanalyst's couch. Of course, Meyer Berger may have made mistakes, and he may have edited out the most important passages. But how accurate is the note-taking of the psychoanalyst? How unmediated is his contact with experiences stored in other people's minds for half a century?

A few passages from "Robert in Wonderland":

In the car we passed horses that don't go, and men that don't go (statues in Washington's streets). We saw the house (German Embassy, on Massachusetts Avenue) where the Bad Men lived. The taxicab man said the Bad Men wasn't there. I said: why? and he said they are in the war shooting down houses. A truck tried to pass our car, but it didn't go as fast as each other. I said why didn't they shoot down the Bad Men when they lived here so they wouldn't shoot down the Good Men's Houses?

In the newspaper office I saw a thing (news ticker). It tells how much dead men are killed and how did they get killed and it tells it very quickly and it jumps up and down. It makes a funny noise, Bup-bup-bup-bup, and it goes back so quickly. When it is stopped writing it purrs like a kitten. We got a kitten that purrs. My kitty's name is Patches. It's a she. It just really is

(Pentagon) The Penny-gone is a big building for cars and for people. Everybody has badges. If they wouldn't have badges Bad People would come. Real soldiers don't live here. They live in War

(Walter Reed Hospital) Soldiers have to walk with sticks. I saw a soldier in pajamas and the Bad Men cut off his leg and

his pajamas too. The Bad Men made these soldiers sick. Maybe his wives will put his foot on again.

(Arlington Cemetery) It is so quiet here because the good soldiers are asleep. He has to sleep here all the time in the world. If a big tank would come and it could run over that Big Thing (Tomb of the Unknown Soldier) it would wake him.

All these soldiers are covered with little houses but without windows and no doors so they can't come out. So they won't shiver and chilly. This is where the Good Soldiers are.

Now, this is an essay about Germany, not about Robert Darnton. I want to get on with it and to avoid detours into soulful introspection. Yet readers should know that these observations about Germany are made by someone who had looked upon Germans with fear and hatred since before he can remember. For me and millions of others in my generation, Germans are the "Bad People." Many of us tried to shake off this prejudice, but it remained hidden below the threshold of our consciousness—until the fall of 1989. The Peaceful Revolution of 1989 did not just free the Germans from the last vestiges of more than a half-century's dictatorial rule. It freed us from what we thought of them.

When I flew to Germany on August 28, 1989, for a full year of research at the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin, my thoughts were occupied with recollections of three incidents. The first went back to my first trip to Germany, in the summer of 1958. I was visiting an American friend at the University of Tübingen. One night the whole town, or so it seemed, gathered under an enormous tent to sing songs and drink themselves into a stupor. I had never seen grown-ups behave like that as a collective group. They linked elbows and rocked to the rhythm of the beer-hall songs. The girls danced on the tables, while the men grabbed at their dresses. And at midnight, punctually, the place closed down.

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Drunken revelers staggered about outside in the dark still clutching their mugs. When they met, they clinked mugs, slapped backs, and bellowed out "Prost!" ("Cheers!")

I set out for the student residence, cold sober and feeling as if I had been trapped inside a hellish scene by Brueghel or Bosch. "Prost!" called a figure that loomed up out of the dark. My feeble German made it obvious that I came from the United States. "Amerikaner!" said the figure, and he began to tell his story.

He had known many Americans during the war. He had guarded them, in a camp. One day an officer picked one of them out. "Make that man *kaput!*" he ordered. "What could I do?" The man shrugged his shoulders. Then, weaving on his feet, he put his beer mug down and reached into his pocket. Out came a pack of matches. He lit a match and held it up to the back of his hand. There flickering in the light, I saw an SS tattoo. "Amerikaner! Brüder!" He called out, as if all were now forgiven. He extended his tattooed hand and took mine in it. Not knowing what to do, I let him shake my hand and walked off into the night feeling dirtied and sick.

The second episode did not happen to me but to a friend of mine, Suzanne. Like many French Jews, she was sent to a family in the south during the war, and she attended school in her adopted town under a false name, as if she were an ordinary Catholic. When the Germans moved into the unoccupied zone, a detachment of troops took over the town. They paraded past the school every day. To the tiny children, they looked funny in their strange uniforms with their odd way of walking. One day as they marched past, a boy in Suzanne's class pointed his finger at them and laughed. The commanding officer stopped the parade, stood the boy up against the school wall, and had him shot by a firing squad.



The "fall" of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked a euphoric moment between Germany's troubled past and anxieties about its future.

For the rest of the war, whenever she saw a group of German soldiers, Suzanne felt an irresistible impulse to laugh. If she spotted them marching through the street, she would run inside her house to a hiding place behind a curtain. Then, she would peer through the window, and as they stomped by, she would bury her face in the material and laugh and laugh and laugh.

The third episode involved my friend Horst. He recounted it to me over coffee in his room under the roof of an ancient building in Wolfenbüttel, the Lower Saxony town where we were both spending the summer as research fellows in the Herzog August Bibliothek. "It's not easy to be called Horst," he began. It took me a minute, but I soon realized he was alluding to Horst Wessel, the Nazi "martyr," who was killed in a brawl in 1930. For the next 15 years sons of Nazis had Horst foisted on them as a name.

By way of explanation, my friend used a four-letter word to describe his father—a petty-minded *petit bourgeois*, who joined the Nazi Party at the first opportunity and threw his weight around as a minor official. On July 20, 1944, Horst, then four or five years old, was traveling with his father and mother in a train. The only other person in their compartment was a man reading a newspaper. After the train pulled into a station, they heard the public address system

announce that there had been an attempt on the Führer's life but that, fortunately, he had escaped unharmed. "Too bad they didn't get the bastard," said the man behind the paper.

Horst's father leaped to his feet. He grabbed the man by the lapels, screaming that he would denounce him to the Gestapo. He could do so easily before the train pulled out, because a Gestapo officer stood just across the platform. But then Horst's mother stood up. She put her hand on Horst's head and shouted at his father: "I swear on the head of this boy that if you do that I will leave you this minute and never come back!" Horst sat there staring at his parents. The man did, too. They were frozen in a silence that seemed to last forever while the father made up his mind. At last he sank back into his seat, the train pulled out, and they all resumed their journey.

Everyone who traveled in Germany during the 1950s and '60s has a collection of such stories. The war touched so many lives that it left its mark everywhere, and anyone who strayed among the ruins would hear horrific tales from survivors with too much on their minds or too much beer in their bellies. But the caricature of the bloated, beery German would not wash by 1989, when I arrived in Germany. By then, I had discovered that I had a great deal in common with the Horsts of my generation—and, besides, other generations had come of age, innocent of any responsibility for Nazism, since they were born after it ended.

What set my generation off from theirs? I asked myself. It was not so much the war as it was a conviction that could be shared by people of my age and cast of mind. Germany represented the Absolute—not the Absolute of Hegelian philosophy, but the only Absolute we could imagine in a world without a God or any clear, transcendent truth: Absolute Evil, the evil of Nazism. Whatever our opinions about politics or ethics or all the other issues we discussed in college bull sessions, we knew that one thing was true: Nazism stood out as a basic point of reference in a landscape composed of endless shades of gray. It was black, pure black, so black that it defined the color of everything around it.

An odd thought to entertain before arriving in Berlin. Was I about to land in the capital of the "evil empire," or was that idea as empty as Ronald Reagan's rhetoric about the Soviet Union? I looked down trying to locate the spot where Hitler's bunker had existed, and I tightened my safety belt.

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Now, looking back on my arrival in Berlin in September 1989, I get a dizzying sense of time spinning out of control. The East Germans had been preparing to celebrate the 40th anniversary of their separate state on the other side of the Wall, and I arrived on a wave of celebrations for the bicentennial of the French Revolution. As a historian of the 18th century, I had spent the summer toasting the fall of the Bastille. The East Germans were beginning to build the reviewing stands where Eric Honecker and Mikhail Gorbachev would preside over a victory march in honor of the triumph of socialism. The era 1949–1989 seemed to fit within the larger span of 1789–1989. By marking off the rise of democracy and socialism, the two time frames reinforced the East German way of piecing together the past.

But within a few weeks everything came apart, and the past suddenly looked problematic. Instead of congratulating Honecker, Gorbachev warned him that, "He who comes too late will be punished by history" (or, in some of the reported versions, "by life"). Gorbachev's remarks on October 7 were taken as a sign that the people could demonstrate in the streets without being gunned down. The demonstrations precipitated the resignation of Honecker (October 18), the collapse of the government (November 7) and the Politburo (November 8), and finally the "fall" of the Wall (November 9). By opening the Wall, the East German authorities, or what remained of them, heralded the end of the Cold War and therefore of East Germany as a separate state. Instead of celebrating the birth of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), they brought about its death.

Like everyone in Berlin, I had a giddy sense of living through historic moments. But I did not at first appreciate what that experience meant to the East Germans.

They did not merely make history; they also had to unmake it—that is, to strip off the orthodoxies that defined the meaning of their country by confronting an unfamiliar, unappealing past. They had been told that West Germany harbored Nazis, while East Germany stood for everything good—“antifascistic humanism” in GDR-speak. But after November 9, they came to see themselves as heirs to a common German past and as victims of a peculiarly East European-type police state.

Perhaps I should have been prepared for such a fundamental adjustment of world-view, but it took me by surprise. Despite my historical training, or perhaps because of it, I had unknowingly fallen into the notion of history as something that happens in the classroom, something between professors and students. In East Germany it was happening in the streets, and ordinary people were taking charge of it. While observing it in the streets, I often came upon posters announcing public discussions of “Blank Spots in GDR History.” On December 13, 1989, I went to one of those debates, something between a town meeting and a rap session sponsored by a citizens’ movement in a working-class neighborhood of East Berlin. I expected to hear declamations against the suppression of the uprisings in East Germany in 1953, in Budapest in 1956, and in Prague in 1968. Those subjects did arise, but the people at the meeting, ordinary citizens from different walks of life, were more intent on challenging the general pattern in the official version of their past. Above all, they were angry. They turned on two professors who had tried to lecture them on the origins of the GDR. Why should East Germany be identified with the Left and West Germany with the Right? they asked. The history of the GDR was really the history of Stalinism, and the professors had perpetuated it. What distinguished Stalinism from fascism? Both were built on the secret police. What differentiated Right from Left? The key dimension in history was above and below—and the professors, like all the apparatchiks, saw things from above. The protesters wanted “true” history, a history of the people, written at street level, full of unvarnished facts, and free of party lines.

As a history professor myself, I had

doubts about the self-evidence of facts. But I was impressed by the sight of people arguing passionately about their past. History matters everywhere in Eastern Europe, because people feel a need to come to terms with the past before they can get their bearings in the present—and the past is littered with “blank spots,” factual gaps created by the old regimes’ unwillingness to confront their own iniquities. One of the first demands of Solidarity, when it reached an agreement with the Polish government in August 1980, was for a “new” history—a “true” history, which would not mince facts but tell the truth about everything inflicted on Poland, from the partitions of the 18th century to the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the massacre at Katyn, and the Red Army’s complicity in the suppression of the Warsaw Uprising in 1945.

The history of East Germany, however, is another story. One of the first acts of the East German parliament elected on March 18, 1990—in the first free election held in East Germany since 1933—was the following resolution:

The first freely chosen parliament of the GDR admits, in the name of the citizens of this country, its share in the responsibility for the humiliation, persecution, and murder of Jewish men, women, and children. We feel sadness and shame and acknowledge this burden of German history.

A curious way to begin a new regime—not with a declaration of independence, as in America in 1776, but with a declaration of guilt. This theme could be found everywhere in East Germany in 1989 and 1990, especially in the speeches of the new prime minister, Lothar de Maiziere: “There is a great deal of history to be worked over in Germany . . . Germany is our inheritance of historical debts and historical guilt.”

The issue arose because the Holocaust was the biggest blank spot in East German history. The authorities of the GDR had denied any responsibility for the extermination of Jews on the grounds that as Communists they, too, had been victims of Hitlerism. After coming to power, they had de-Nazified with a vengeance, while their counterparts in West Germany permitted former Nazis into positions at almost every level of government.

But after the Communists were ousted from the GDR, the situation looked less simple. The new East German authorities acknowledged that guilt existed on both sides of the border, and when they erased the border, they accepted their part in the common German past. They underwent reunification by guilt, not merely by subscribing to the West German Constitution. Even then they discovered ambiguities. To sort things out, they felt compelled to dig the past up—literally.

In March 1990, two historians unearthed a mass burial site near the former concentration camp of Fünfeichen. After conquering East Germany in 1945, the Soviets had herded suspected Nazis into the same camps that the Nazis had used for their own victims. Many of the Germans were innocent. Many died of starvation and disease, and the Soviets dumped them in unmarked graves. Forty years later, when the Soviet threat had disappeared, the East Germans began to dig the bodies up, first at Fünfeichen, then at 10 other camps, including the most terrible of all: Sachsenhausen, Bautzen, and Buchenwald. The victims of Stalinism lay in the same earth as the victims of Nazism, in the foulest corners of European history.

While they uncovered those crimes, the East Germans raked over more recent abuses of the police state. After occupying the offices of their own secret police (Stasi), they had come upon 100 kilometers of files covering six million citizens. In 1985 Honecker had launched a program to produce a computerized file for every person in the GDR, and the Stasi had accumulated enough material to compromise a large proportion of the country's 16 million inhabitants. The citizens' committees that took over the Stasi headquarters tried to keep the records under lock and key, but enough leaked out to incriminate a whole string of politicians who had taken the lead in the East German revolution.

According to information released by the caretaker government on January 15, 1990, at least one of every 40 adults was a paid agent of the Stasi. According to information obtained by *Der Spiegel*, one of every 10 deputies to the East German parliament elected on March 18 had collaborated with the Stasi in one way or other—

and they included Lothar de Maziere, who as prime minister had called upon the East Germans to confront their "historical guilt" by taking up the burden of the past.

Which past? The East Germans found it difficult to distinguish between phenomena that once had seemed to occupy opposite poles on the ideological spectrum. They did not identify the police state of Honecker with the police state of Hitler, but they saw nuances where they once had seen opposites. The banners carried in the demonstrations expressed their new sense of shading: "Stalinism-Stasinism" and "Stasi-Nazi."

The succession of police states means that nearly everyone has a place on some secret list, either as a denunciator or a suspect. By digging through the last 57 years of their history, the East Germans encountered nothing solid on which they could construct a collective identity. They had nowhere to go, except West Germany. In choosing absorption in the West, they did not simply vote to join a consumer society. They identified with a republic that had managed its affairs successfully for 40 years and had come to terms with its Nazi past by open, often acrimonious debate, rather than by denial and repression.

Where did exposure to the torment of East Germany leave a self-confessed Germanophobe? I tried to understand the East Germans, not to judge them. In marching next to them in their demonstrations, listening to them in their political debates, dancing with them on their Wall, and accompanying them on the rounds of their daily business—in workshops, pubs, and provincial town halls—I could not help but sympathize with their attempts to cope with a cruel regime. Of course, the East Germans had made that regime themselves, with help from the Red Army. But when the Red Army withdrew, they unmade it. I did not know which to admire more, their courage in defying the state or their self-restraint when they destroyed it.

Also, like any traveler in a foreign land, I did not encounter the population in the abstract and en masse. I met individuals. They were ordinary people, not heroic and not particularly political, just fed up with the system. When the opportunity arose,

they took to the streets in protest, but mostly they went about their business, whether it was repairing cars or censoring books. What will become of them now?

The jokes that I enjoyed in Werner Hartwig's body shop about the East German car, the Trabi, have now worn thin. The Trabi itself is extinct, so Werner can no longer perform miracles on wrecks, amputating and transplanting parts according to the principle of "out of two make one." Can he remake his East Berlin shop in order to practice surgery on Mercedes?

The two censors I interviewed, Hans-Jurgen Wegener and Christina Horn, face more serious unemployment, because censorship no longer exists, nor does literature itself as that peculiar system for producing and diffusing the printed word within a "command economy." Now that the book trade is driven by the literary marketplace, nearly all the writers, editors, and publishers I met are headed for the bread line. Like the censors themselves, they do not know how to make their way in the strange, new system of Western literature.

The professors seem equally disoriented. No one in Leipzig pines for the Department of Marxism and Leninism at the top of the 27-story high-rise that the Communists built on the ruins of the medieval university. But almost every week I receive a letter from Leipzig or Halle or Berlin, worrying that the Academy of Sciences is being dissolved or that the universities have no budgets or that professors must undergo ideological-professional examinations, conducted by colleagues from the West.

I worry less about Annemarie and Christoph Muller, the pastors who took charge of the revolution in the little village of Laucha in Thuringia. After mobilizing their entire community and driving the local Stasi agents into "early retirement," they managed to get a member of New Forum, the citizens' movement, elected

mayor. At the height of the excitement in October and November 1989, they even filled their church. The congregation may have prayed most fervently to be delivered from the Stasi, but, for the first time in their lives, the Mullers saw their church full. Now it is an empty shell once more, a monument to more prosperous times in the 16th century, and the congregation is reduced to a few old women.

The flaming words of 1989, like those of 1789, have vanished in the air. The fire has gone out of East Germany, and a burnt-out, morning-after sense of sobriety hangs over the land. The East Germans think of the day care, low rents, and full employment (with part-time labor) guaranteed them by their former masters. They look for the economic miracle and see a mirage. But no one I know laments the old regime.

I learned enough last year to distrust my power as a prophet; but whatever the future holds for the former German Democratic Republic, I think one can be sure that it will be free from tapped phones and steamed-open letters and spies extending from kindergarten to the assembly line. The East Germans have survived their double exposure to places like Buchenwald. Now, for the first time in 57 years, they no longer live under the shadow of the secret police. They have shaken off the last vestiges of totalitarianism, and they have learned to face their past.

If the East Germans can look backward without blinking, they should be able to look forward with some confidence. And we should do the same. Instead of reviving old fears, the reunification of Germany should put them to rest. The Nazi-Stasi Germany is gone. The new Germany offers a way out of the 20th century and an opportunity to say with more assurance than our fathers at the century's beginning: *Good-bye to all that!*