



## “There Is No Closure”

To visit Berlin in spring 2005 was for this American like hitchhiking through an unfamiliar solar system. Whereas official Washington radiates certainty and optimism, even about Iraq, the German capital is suffused with ambiguity and gloom. In the United States, Old Glory is blazoned everywhere—on cars, lapels, and storefronts—and American flags bloom thick as dandelions in suburban front yards; in Berlin, the German tricolor is virtually invisible. Indeed, President Horst Köhler, on assuming office in 2004, startled Germans and broke with precedent when he dared say, “I love our country.” Homosexuality is a hot-button issue in the Land of the Free, whereas in Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, as the Social Democratic candidate for mayor announced in 2001, “I am gay, and that’s a good thing.” (He was elected and his words became a popular expression, prompting similar candor by the Christian Democratic mayor of Hamburg and, more recently, the national chairman of the Free Democratic Party.) Berliners prefer a shrug to histrionics. As they patiently explain to puzzled Americans, a saying currently inscribed on city buses means just what it says: “Das Leben ist hart genug” (Life is hard enough).

As usual in Berlin, the arrival of spring was heralded by a radiant procession of flowering lilacs, wisteria vines, and chestnut trees. And as has been the case since the 1989 demise of the Berlin Wall, informality and irreverence unite the city’s otherwise contentious eastern and western inhabitants. Women continue to favor skin-tight jeans and spiky hair, sometimes dyed in tints ranging from marmalade to raspberry; men favor earrings and close-cropped Bert Brecht hairdos as they bike at homicidal speeds on sidewalk cycle paths. But this spring, the skies were as overcast as the political climate. The mood found its expression in a cryptic display in central Berlin designed by the Norwegian conceptual artist Lars Ramberg. It crowned the Palace of the Republic, a surviving relic of East Germany along with the occasional Trabant car and the Ampelmännchen, the little men on traffic lights that tell you when to stop and go. His display consisted of seven huge white letters, visible for miles away on Unter den Linden, reading “Zweifel” (Doubt).

“Doubt” alludes to the fate of the palace, whose demolition has been delayed by lack of funds and the fierce objections of former East Germans who hold the shoebox-shaped building in stubborn affection. It has become the apt keyword not only for Germany but for Europe as a disheartened whole. Old Cold War certitudes have long since evaporated, and the recent centrist consensus about forming a more perfect European Union now lies in shambles. Elsewhere in this issue, Mira Kamdar describes how President Jacques Chirac disastrously misjudged French sentiment leading up to the May referendum on the proposed new EU constitution. And as Dutch voters within days also rejected the complex charter, Britain’s Tony Blair—his Labor government having narrowly survived a third-term election—hedged on his own once-firm commitment to a stronger European Union. Across Europe, rattled politicians, left, right, and center, cope with stalled economies, deepening concern about imperiled social benefits, rising xenophobia and, not least, resentment over America’s perceived hegemony.

For Washington, dealing with a tetchy, confused, and demoralized Europe will test the nerves and skills of an administration that so far has undervalued diplomacy. Americans have taken Europe's essential stability for granted. For all the sniping at France and Germany, Old Europe has served as a cautioning counterweight to Washington's impulsiveness. Moreover, as we tend to forget, European leaders have pioneered creative initiatives: the Common Market and the transnational euro, West Germany's Ostpolitik or Opening to the East, the various Hague tribunals on war crimes, the 1972 Stockholm conference that first put the environment on the agenda, and the Helsinki Accords that played so critical a role in the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet empire. In all this, Europeans have evinced a stoic sense of human limits, rooted in the memories of the unequalled carnage of two world wars.

Now Washington must reckon with an embattled political elite, for the moment rudderless and perhaps tempted to court extremist groups whose votes could tip close elections. At the least, this threatens a Bush-bashing breakdown in alliance civility, followed by beggar-thy-neighbor trade wars (already foreshadowed by the massive U.S. legal assault on Europe's subsidized aircraft industry). At the worst, Americans may again confront Yeats's slouching beast in the form of left- and right-wing populism, mass demonstrations, and religious zealotry, enough to make even Donald Rumsfeld nostalgic for stodgy Old Europe.

In Germany, notably, "Doubt" in all its guises clouds the past, present, and future.

### *A Consuming Obsession*

For many Germans, history is a consuming obsession, prompting an ongoing argument that oscillates between denial and self-torment since everybody's parents and grandparents were in darker times to some degree victims or perpetrators, or both. This spring, the river of retrospect overflowed as Berliners marked the sixtieth year of Germany's defeat, the last big anniversary in which substantial numbers of living witnesses can take part. There is a boom in memoirs and military history. By my count, at least seven new books are titled "1945," three others are devoted to Hitler's final days in his Berlin bunker (also the subject of a major film), all part of a continuing, agonizing reappraisal of three tumultuous German centuries. Berlin's 50-odd museums capitalize on every imaginable anniversary for special exhibits. A short list of anniversaries crowding the spring calendar includes Einstein's major discoveries (100 years), the poet Schiller's death (200 years), the completion of Schloss Charlottenburg (300 years), the first Expressionist artworks (100 years), the dedication of West Berlin's American-style library (50 years), and the opening of diplomatic relations with Israel (40 years)—each inspiring exhibits, speeches, publications, and/or concerts.

In these rites, the Federal Republic's president has come to play the role of a moral ombudsman, fixing the tone and vocabulary of self-reckoning. Thus on the fortieth anniversary of Germany's surrender, the theme was remorse and reconciliation as President Richard von Weizsäcker drew a line between victims and perpetrators and called May 8, when the war ended, "a day of liberation." A decade later, Roman Herzog became the first German president invited by Poland to take part in ceremonies marking the liberation of Auschwitz, which he called "a place of mourning and remembrance." This year, on the sixtieth anniversary, President Horst Köhler said at the same death camp, "More than others, we Germans need to ensure that what led up to these crimes must never take root again." According to exegetes who deconstruct these nuances, the "others" was a new note, amplified by the president's remarks to Germany's parliament on May 8. Besides grieving for all Nazi Germany's victims, he declared, "We think of the millions of people who died in foreign pris-

ons and the hundreds of thousands who were sent to Soviet forced-labor camps. We think of the suffering of German refugees and those forcibly expelled, the raped women and victims of bomb attacks against civilians.”

This universalizing of evil goes back to a decades-old debate among German historians over the comparative wickedness of Hitler and Stalin, and that took a different turn in 1994–95 (a year I lived in Berlin), when the Allied firebombing of Dresden was among the wartime horrors given new emphasis in print and film. Since then, leading writers, notably W. G. Sebald (1944–2001), have opened a fresh inquest into the unrelenting Allied bombing of German cities in the war’s final months. This anniversary year, German suffering figured prominently in the German Historical Museum’s comprehensive exhibition on World War II. Via memorabilia and texts, the visitor is reminded that 12 million Germans were expelled from their previous homelands, of whom 2 million died in the process.

Yet broadening the war’s toll is of itself both morally defensible and humanly understandable. It is a matter of reproach that the Pentagon fails to report Iraqi casualties with the same care that it lists every American death. Certainly, no one can sanely argue that German observances play down or neglect Nazi war crimes. Throughout Berlin one encounters recently embedded “stumbling blocks,” brass cobbles inscribed with the names and fates of former Jewish residents near their old homes. The German Historical Museum coupled its World War II exhibit with “Legalized Robbery,” elaborately detailing the wholesale pillaging of Jewish property in Nazi times. On May 10, President Köhler, along with a flotilla of notables, dedicated the striking Holocaust Memorial in central Berlin, comprising 2,711 black slabs, or stele, that silently recall the 6 million Jews who perished at German hands.

The problem, rather, is that other belligerents in World War II have their competing narratives, thereby reopening old gashes. The historic grievances of the three Baltic republics were revived as their post-Soviet leaders recalled that May 1945 did not signify liberation, but the onset of Communist oppression. Poles revived attacks on the Yalta Agreement, asserting that Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill needlessly legitimized Soviet dominion over Eastern Europe (with President Bush echoing both Polish and Baltic views). For their part, Russians fiercely rejected these claims and restated their justifiable criticism of inadequate Western recognition of immense Soviet losses in the Great Patriotic War (more than 20 million lives, with a million civilians lost during the 900-day siege of Leningrad, among them Vladimir Putin’s father). And as if to rub salt in still-festering wounds, Moscow’s Pushkin Museum opened a lavish exhibition of art and antiquities seized in Germany by “trophy brigades” and then hidden for decades. Although Mikhail Gorbachev as Soviet leader promised reciprocal exchange of all uprooted art, his Russian successors have renounced the agreement, citing Russia’s wartime losses. (The stained glass windows stripped from a church at Frankfurt/Oder are among the few major art works restituted since German unification.)

The defining words that sum up this spring’s observances were spoken by President Horst Köhler in his May 8 address to the German parliament: “Es gibt keinen Schlussstrich” (There is no closure).

### *Life Is Hard*

None of this would be of major concern but for Europe’s galloping disarray as its flustered centrist leaders seek new paths from a moral, political, and economic labyrinth. This March, Germany’s Federal Labor Office reported that 5,216,000 workers were jobless, a postwar record and the highest percentage since the bleak 1930s. In the 1970s, as the

newsweekly *Spiegel* reports, half of Germany's employees worked in factories; the figure is now 27 percent. Automation, outsourcing, and the high cost of mandatory benefits have shaved the industrial workforce to less than 10 million out of a population of 82 million.

The political price for Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's red-green coalition came due in May when fed-up workers in Germany's industrial heartland did the unthinkable by casting the once-impregnable Social Democrats from state power in North Rhine-Westphalia. To the surprise and dismay of his loyalists, a disheartened Schröder called for a snap election this September, a year before his government's term is to expire. Having already benefited in a close 2002 national vote by faulting U.S. "adventurism" in Iraq, the embattled chancellor may well attempt a more strident encore, especially in eastern Germany, where the jobless rate exceeds 20 percent.

This poses an interesting challenge to Schröder's principal opponent, the Christian Democrat Angela Merkel, herself a former East German, who would become the country's first woman chancellor. Yet, in the eyes of skeptics, she is a lightweight, "too eastern for the West, too western for the East." In any case, one can expect a long, hot August, followed by a rowdy September, as Germany's political class deals with the especially touchy issues of immigration and Islam.

Hard to believe, but Berlin is the city with the third largest Turkish population (more than 200,000) after Istanbul and Ankara. What one may credibly call German nativists castigate the Turks for working too hard at low pay and clinging stubbornly to their own culture and Islamic religion. These are the bigoted skinheads, especially numerous in the disoriented eastern states, where neo-Nazis scored their biggest electoral victory, gaining 9.2 percent in Saxony's state elections. But even centrists worry about the wild-card allure of Turk- and Muslim-bashing, quickened by plausible concern over Germany's role in nurturing Islamic terrorists. A major target of nativists is Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, a Green Party leader with radical credentials dating to his student years in the 1960s. A centrist on most issues, Fischer is faulted by critics for his liberal visa and asylum policies. He is accused of opening the doors to criminal gangs engaged in human trafficking, and is an offstage defendant in a major criminal trial in Bavaria involving 73 defendants.

How will all of this play in Germany's forthcoming general election? It is an interesting question, especially given the country's shrinking and graying population. In a best-selling book titled *The Methuselah Conspiracy*, the co-publisher of the influential *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Frank Shirrmacher, argues that the dwindling number of children and growing majority of seniors means that for the first time in German history "old people will outnumber children." Thus, the age group most liable to nurse grudges, dislike foreigners, and worry most about welfare benefits is likely to be the arbiter of Germany's future. There is indeed no closure, and life in Germany is hard enough. ●

—Karl E. Meyer