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‘Absolutely extraordinary’ JAMES HAWES

# AFTERMATH

## LIFE IN THE FALLOUT OF THE THIRD REICH 1945–1955

HARALD JÄHNER

# Praise for *Aftermath*

'Magisterial, fascinating, humane – a brilliant book of the greatest importance and achievement'

– Philippe Sands, author of *East West Street* and *The Ratline*

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'Many consider the years before 1945 to be the most crucial in understanding Germany and the Germans. Wait until you have read this book'

– Norman Ohler, author of *Blitzed: Drugs in the Third Reich*

'Harald Jähner's deeply researched, panoramic account of how Germany rebuilt and discovered itself from 1945–1955 is an eye-opening, thrilling read'

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'Rarely has a non-fiction book so skilfully combined vividness, drama and eloquence'

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'Jähner's gripping X-ray-vision tale of an often overlooked and misperceived phase of German history reveals, like all great history books, as much about the first decade after the war as about today'

– *The German Times*

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## 1945–1955

HARALD JÄHNER

Translated by Shaun Whiteside

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# Preface

On 18 March 1952 the *Neue Zeitung* published an article by the author and editor Kurt Kusenberg entitled NOTHING CAN BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED: PRAISE FOR A TIME OF MISERY. Only seven years on, the author yearned for the weeks of confusion that had followed the end of the Second World War in Germany. Even though nothing had worked at the time – not the postal service, the railways, public transport – in spite of the homelessness, the hunger and the occasional corpse that still lay buried under the rubble, in retrospect those weeks struck him as having been a good time. 'Like children,' he wrote, people after the war had begun 'to mend the torn net of human relationships'. His choice of words is unusual and perhaps a little disconcerting . . . 'Like children'?

Kusenberg urgently recommended that his readers imagine themselves back into the 'starving, tattered, shivering, poverty-stricken, dangerous time' when, in the absence of state order, morality and social connections were redefined among the scattered people:

> Respectability did not exclude resourcefulness and cunning – not even the petty theft of food. But in this semi-larcenous life there was an honour among thieves that was perhaps more moral than today's cast-iron conscience.

It is a strange nostalgia. Was there really supposed to have been so much adventure immediately after the war, so much 'honour among

thieves'? So much innocence? The unifying force that had held the Germans together until the end of the war had been – fortunately – completely ruptured. The old order was gone, a new one was written in the stars, and for now the Allies supplied the basic necessities needed to maintain the population. The 75 million or so people collected on what remained of German soil in the summer of 1945 hardly merited the name of a society. People talked about 'no man's time', the 'time of the wolves' in which 'man had become a wolf towards his fellow man'. The ethos of everyone caring only for themselves or their wolf-pack shaped the country's national identity until deep into the 1950s, by which point conditions had been improving for some time and yet despite this people still stubbornly withdrew into their families as self-contained refuges.

After the war over half the population of Germany were neither where they belonged nor wanted to be, including 9 million bombed-out people and evacuees, 14 million refugees and exiles, 10 million released forced labourers and prisoners, and countless millions of slowly returning prisoners of war. How was this horde of ragged, displaced, impoverished and leftover people broken up and reassembled? And how did former 'national comrades' (*Volksgenossen*), as German nationals were known under Nazism, gradually become ordinary citizens again?

These are questions that threaten to disappear under the weight of momentous historical events. The most important changes were played out in everyday life, in the organisation of food, for example, in looting, money-changing, shopping. And also in love, as a wave of sexual adventurousness followed the war. There was some keen disappointment when much-missed husbands failed to return home, but, equally, many Germans now saw things with different eyes, they wanted to start everything afresh, and divorce rates leapt.

The collective memory of the post-war age in Germany is shaped by a few images that have etched their way deeply into people's minds: the Russian soldier pulling a woman's bicycle out of her hands; dim black-market figures clustering around a few eggs; the temporary Nissen huts housing refugees and people whose houses had been

bombed; the women questioningly holding up photographs of their missing husbands to the returning prisoners of war. These few pictures are so visually powerful that they imprinted on the German public memory of the first post-war years like an unchanging silent film – although, it must be said, half of life ends up on the cutting-room floor.

While memory usually bathes the past in a softer light with the passing years, the reverse is true for the post-war period in Germany. In hindsight it became increasingly dark. One reason for that lies in the widespread need among Germans who had not been persecuted by the Nazi regime to see themselves, nevertheless, as victims. Many people clearly felt that the grimmer the accounts of the genuinely terrible starving winters of 1946 and 1947, the more their guilt was diminished. But if we listen carefully we can also hear laughter. A spontaneous Rosenmontag (Rose Monday) carnival procession passed through a terribly depopulated Cologne as early as 1946. The journalist Margret Boveri remembered the feeling of life being 'enormously enhanced by the approaching nearness of death'. In the years when there was nothing to buy she had been so happy that she later decided not to undertake any major purchases even when times improved.

Misery cannot be understood without the pleasure that it provokes. Escaping death drove some into apathy, others into a passionate love of life. The old order of things had gone off the rails, families had been torn apart, connections lost – but people were starting to mingle again, and anyone young and spirited saw the chaos as a playground in which they had to seek their joy anew each day.

*

The Holocaust played a shockingly small part in the consciousness of most Germans in the post-war period. Some were aware of the crimes on the Eastern Front, and a certain fundamental guilt at having started the war in the first place was acknowledged, but there was no room in many people's thoughts and feelings for the murder of millions of German and European Jews. Only a very few individuals,

such as the philosopher Karl Jaspers, addressed the issue publicly. The Jews were not even explicitly mentioned in the much-debated admissions of guilt by the Protestant and Catholic Churches in August 1945.

In a perfidious way the unthinkability of the Holocaust also extended to the nation that had perpetrated it. The crimes had an enormity which banished them from the collective consciousness even while they were happening. The fact that even well-intentioned people refused to think about what would happen to their deported neighbours has left trust in the human species severely shaken even into the present day. And the majority of Germans at the time were guilty of this.

The hushing-up of the extermination camps continued after the end of the war, even though the Allies tried to forcibly confront the defeated German people with evidence of Nazi crimes. Post-war Chancellor Helmut Kohl used the sardonic phrase 'the blessing of late birth' to suggest that the younger generation had no right to feel quite so superior to the one that came before. But there was also the blessing of the experience of terror. The nights of bombing raids, the harsh starvation winters of the first post-war years and the sheer struggle for survival under anarchic everyday conditions kept many Germans from thinking about the past. They saw themselves as the victims, and thus had the dubious good fortune of not having to think about the real ones. Because, had they still been halfway decent after all that had happened, had they been aware of the systematic mass murder committed in their name, with their tacit support and thanks to their willingness to turn a blind eye, they would hardly have been able to summon the courage and energy required to live through the post-war years.

The survival instinct shuts out feelings of guilt – a collective phenomenon that can be studied in the years after 1945 and must be deeply unsettling to anyone with faith in humanity. But how the two societies of East and West Germany, both anti-fascist in their different ways, could both be founded on repression and distortion is a mystery that this book seeks to address by immersing itself in the extreme challenges and curious lifestyles of the post-war years.

Even though books like Anne Frank's *Diary* or Eugen Kogon's *SS-State* disrupted the process of repression, it was only with the Auschwitz trials beginning in 1963 that many Germans began to reckon with the crimes that had been committed in their name. In the eyes of the younger generation the Germans had brought extreme dishonour upon themselves by postponing the trials, even though in purely material terms they had profited considerably from their parents' capacity for repression. Seldom in history has a generational conflict been waged with more bitterness, rage and self-righteousness than that of the young German people of 1968 against their parents.

Today, the German people's overall impression of the post-war years has been shaped by the perspective of those who were young at the time. The anti-authoritarian fury the children felt towards their parents' generation – a generation that had not made itself easy to love – was so intense, their criticism so eloquent, that the myth of a suffocating layer of fustiness that needed to be eliminated still dominates the image of the 1950s held by most Germans, in spite of more sophisticated historical research. The generation born around 1950 enjoyed the role of having made the Federal Republic (West Germany) inhabitable and having given democracy a heart, and this generation continues to promulgate that picture. In reality, though, there remained a strong presence of the old Nazi elite in the offices of the Federal Republic during this time, which was a source of revulsion for many, as was the readiness with which Nazi criminals were granted amnesties. However, the post-war era in Germany was more exciting, its sense of life more open, its intellectuals more critical, its spectrum of opinion broader, its art more innovative, and its everyday life was more contradictory than the impressions that have prevailed from 1968 until the present day might suggest. It is something that research for this book has revealed time and again.

There is another reason why the first four post-war years in Germany represent a relative blind spot in historical memory. Between the big chapters and research headings of history they form a kind of no man's time for which, loosely speaking, no one is really responsible. One major chapter in German school history deals with the

Nazi regime, ending with the capitulation of the German Wehrmacht, while the next, which begins in 1949, tells the story of the Federal Republic (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and is concentrated at best on currency reform and the Berlin blockade as a backstory to the foundation of the two states. The years between the end of the war and the currency reform, the economic Big Bang of the Federal Republic, are in a sense a lost time for historiography, because they lack an institutional subject. German history-writing is essentially still structured as a national history, which places the state as a political subject at its centre. But from 1945 four political centres were responsible for German history: Washington, Moscow, London and Paris, each exercising authority over their designated occupation zone – hardly ideal conditions to construct a national history.

The classroom appraisal of the crimes perpetrated against the Jews and forced labourers also ends, as a rule, with the happy liberation of the survivors by Allied soldiers. But what happened to them after that? What about the 10 million or so starving prisoners, already dragged from their homelands and now dumped unsupervised in the land of their torturers and murderers? How did they react? The way the Allied soldiers, the vanquished Germans and the liberated forced labourers behaved towards one another is one of the saddest, but also one of the most fascinating, aspects of the post-war years.

Over the course of this book the focus shifts from the societal aspects of everyday life – from clearing up, making love, stealing and shopping – to the cultural features: the life of the mind and the efflorescence of a radical new visual aesthetic. Here, questions of conscience, guilt and repression are asked more pointedly. Instances of denazification, which also had its aesthetic side, are treated with appropriate care. The fact that the arts (broadly taken to mean architecture, painting etc.) of the 1950s found such lasting fame may be traced back to one surprising factor: by altering their surroundings the Germans changed themselves. But was it really the Germans who so radically transformed the shape of their world? A fight broke out around concepts of design and abstract art, in which the occupying

powers of America, Britain, France and Russia all pulled strings; it concerned the aesthetic decoration of the two German republics, pitting the socialist realism of the East against the abstract art of the West, and would define the sense of beauty during the Cold War. Even the CIA was involved.

Even more than is the case today, German people tended to present themselves as refined, sophisticated and tirelessly involved in serious discussions, as if it were possible to pick up seamlessly from the manners of the nineteenth century, which had been transformed into 'the good old days'. Today we know a great deal about the Holocaust. What we know less about is how life in Germany continued under the shadow it cast across the country's future. How does a nation in whose name many millions of people were murdered talk about culture and morality? Would it be better, for decency's sake, to avoid talking about decency altogether? To let one's children find out for themselves what is good and what is evil? In the years immediately following the war analysts in the media were working overtime, along with other institutions, to take part in the reconstruction of society. Everybody was talking about a 'hunger for meaning'. Philosophising on 'the ruins of existence' meant searching for meaning, just as many were reduced to searching for scraps among the rubble.

# I

# *Zero Hour?*

## Never before was there so much beginning. And never so much end

The theatre critic Friedrich Luft experienced the end of the war in a basement. Down in a villa near Nollendorfplatz in Berlin, he had sat out the last few days of the final battle with a few other local people amidst the 'smell of smoke, blood, sweat and gunpowder'. It was safer in the basement than in the apartments, exposed as they were to crossfire between the Red Army and the Wehrmacht. Luft recalled the day that the Red Army arrived in Berlin:

> It was an inferno outside. If you peered out you saw a helpless German tank pushing its way through the blazing rows of houses, stopping, firing, turning round. Every now and again a civilian, darting from shelter to shelter, stumbled along badly bombed streets. A mother with her pram rushed from a bullet-riddled, burning house towards the nearest bunker.[1]

An old man who had been crouching near the basement window was shredded by shrapnel. On one occasion a few soldiers from an office in Wehrmacht Supreme Command drifted in, 'irritated, discouraged, sick fellows'. Each of them carried a cardboard box of civilian clothing, so that they could disappear 'in an emergency', as they said. How much emergency was still to come? 'Just clear off,' the

inhabitants of the basement hissed. No one wanted to be near them as the end approached. At one point, the corpse of the feared local Nazi block warden was carried past in a wheelbarrow; he had thrown himself out of a window.

Suddenly it occurred to someone that there was a pile of swastika flags and pictures of Hitler stored in the house opposite. A few brave people went over to burn everything, to get rid of it before the Russians came. When the gunfire suddenly grew louder again and the theatre critic looked cautiously out of the basement door, he saw an SS patrol also peering over a remnant of wall. The men were still combing the area in search of shirkers that they could take with them to their deaths.

> Then it became quieter. As we carefully climbed the narrow steps towards an eternity of listening and waiting, it rained softly. On houses beyond Nollendorfplatz we saw white flags gleaming. We wrapped white rags around our arms. Then two Russians climbed over the same low wall over which the SS men had come so menacingly just a few moments before. We raised our arms, we pointed at our armbands. They waved us away. They were smiling. The war was over.

For Friedrich Luft the end of the war, later to be called Zero Hour by some, had struck on 30 April. In Aachen, 640 kilometres west of Berlin, the war had already been over for six months; it had been the first German city to be taken by the Americans in October 1944. In Duisburg the war had been over in the districts to the west of the Rhine since 28 March, but on the east of the Rhine it raged for another 16 days. There are even three dates for the official capitulation of Germany. Generaloberst Alfred Jodl signed the unconditional surrender on 7 May in Reims in the headquarters of US General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Even though the document expressly acknowledged the Western Allies and the Red Army as the victors, Stalin insisted that the ceremony be repeated, so on 9 May Germany capitulated again; this time Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm Keitel signed the document in the Soviet headquarters in Berlin-Karlshorst. And for

the history books, the victorious powers agreed on the day in between, 8 May, on which nothing had actually happened at all.[2]

For Walter Eiling, Zero Hour still hadn't arrived four years later, at which time he was still in Ziegenhain Prison for 'Crimes against the Ordnance on Antisocial Parasites'. The waiter from Hesse had been arrested in 1942 for buying a goose, three chickens and ten pounds of salted meat at Christmas. A special Nazi court had sentenced him to eight years of imprisonment followed by preventive detention for 'Violation of the War Economy Regulations'. After the end of the war Walter Eiling and his family had believed that he would be swiftly released. But it didn't even occur to the legal authorities to review his case. When the justice minister of the region of Greater Hesse, under American military supervision, finally rescinded the absurdly severe punishment, his office insisted that the imprisonment had been repealed but not the preventive detention. Walter Eiling remained in prison. Later applications for release were rejected on the grounds that the prisoner was unstable, inclined towards arrogance, and not yet capable of returning to work.

In Eiling's cell the rule of the Nazi regime lived on, even beyond the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany.[3] Fates such as his were the reason why the concept of the end of the war being a 'Zero Hour', a fresh start, was later violently disputed. In the corporate head offices, courts and offices of the Federal Republic most of the Nazi elite cheerfully carried on. Such continuities were concealed by talk of Zero Hour, which served to emphasise the desire for a new beginning and stress a clear normative watershed between the old state and the new, even though life, of course, carried on and dragged any amount of Third Reich legacy with it. However, the idea of Zero Hour was emblematic of the elemental break that Germany had experienced and not only does the concept remain useful, but in academic history it is even enjoying a renaissance.[4]

Elsewhere, every form of public order was collapsing. Police officers looked helplessly at one another, uncertain whether they still held their posts. Anyone who had a uniform preferred to take it off and burn it, or maybe dye it a different colour. Senior officials

poisoned themselves, lower-ranking civil servants threw themselves out of the window or slit their wrists. It was the start of no man's time; laws had been overruled, yet no one was responsible for anything. Nothing belonged to anyone anymore, unless they were sitting on it. No one was responsible, no one was ensured protection. The old power had run away, the new one hadn't yet arrived; only the noise of artillery suggested that it would come eventually. Even the most sophisticated people engaged in looting. In little hordes they broke into food stores and roamed through abandoned apartments in search of food and a place to sleep.

In Berlin, journalist Ruth Andreas-Friedrich, doctor Walter Seitz, actor Fred Denger, and German-Russian musical conductor Leo Borchard discovered a white ox in the middle of the disputed capital. The group had just sought cover in a nearby house from a low-flying air raid, when suddenly the animal was standing in front of them,

*Survival techniques in the city: a Berliner collecting firewood in the remains of the Tiergarten park.*

unharmed and gentle-eyed, a surreal sight in the smoking scene of horror. They surrounded it and gently manoeuvred it by the horns, managing to lure it carefully into the backyard of the house. But what were they to do next? How do four urbane, cultivated citizens slaughter a cow? The conductor, who had a command of Russian, plucked up the courage to speak to a Soviet soldier outside the house. The soldier helped them to kill the animal with two pistol shots. The friends now hesitantly went to work on the dead creature with kitchen knifes. They weren't alone with their booty for long. 'Suddenly, as if the underworld had been spying on them, a noisy crowd gathered around the dead ox,' Ruth Andreas-Friedrich later recorded in her diary. 'They crept from a hundred basements. Women, men, children. Were they lured by the smell of blood?' And within minutes everyone was tussling for the scraps of meat. Five blood-smeared fists ripped the ox's tongue from its throat. 'So this is what the hour of liberation looks like. The moment we have spent twelve years waiting for?' she wrote.[5]

*

After the white ox had been carved up and torn to pieces, the four friends climbed into a bombed-out apartment and rummaged through the cupboards. Instead of food they found only large amounts of sherbet, which they laughingly crammed into their mouths. When, still joking, they tried on some of the unknown residents' clothes, they were suddenly horrified by their own brazenness. Their boldness subsided and the four anxiously lay down in the marriage bed of the unknown inhabitants who, according to their doorbell, were called Machulke. HOME SWEET HOME, read the embroidered words above the bed.

It was 11 days after they first crossed Berlin's boundary at Malchow before the Red Army had advanced to the last inner-city districts. So even here, in the capital, the end of the war didn't happen everywhere at the same time. Marta Hillers, who was a journalist in Berlin and later wrote under the pen name Anonyma, didn't dare ride her

bicycle through the ruined city until 7 May when, curious, she cycled a few kilometres south from Berlin-Tempelhof. That evening she recorded in her diary:

> In this part of town the war ended one day earlier than where we are. You can see civilians sweeping the streets. Two women are pushing and pulling a mobile operating unit, sterile lamps ablaze, probably recovered from the rubble. An old woman is lying on top of the unit under a woollen blanket, her face white, but she's still alive. The farther south I ride the further the war recedes. Here you can even see whole groups of Germans standing around and chatting. People don't dare do that where we live.[6]

The next day Ruth Andreas-Friedrich set off through the city and tried to make her first contact with colleagues, friends and relatives. Like everyone else she was eager for news, progress reports, general assessments. Only a few days later, life in Berlin had calmed down to such an extent that she was able to move back into her severely battered apartment. On the balcony she made a makeshift stove of stones that had been lying about, trying to warm herself up a little. A Robinson Crusoe camp in the middle of the city. Gas and electricity were out of the question.

She recorded sudden mood swings in her diary. Hitler was dead, summer was coming, and she wanted to make something of her life at last. She couldn't wait to go back to work, to use her gift for observation, her talent as a writer. Only two months had passed since the end of the war, and she wrote in a moment of euphoria:

> The whole city is living in a frenzy of expectation. People are willing to tear themselves apart just to get back to work. They wish they had a thousand hands and a thousand brains. The Americans are here. The English, the Russians. The French are supposed to be on their way. [. . .] All that matters is that we are at the centre of the action. That the world powers are meeting in our rubble, and that we can prove to the representatives of those world powers how serious we are about our

> eagerness, how infinitely serious we are about our efforts to make amends and rise again. Berlin is working full blast. If people understand and forgive us now, we will do everything for them. Everything! We will renounce National Socialism in favour of something new, we will work and we will be fundamentally good-willed. Never have we been so ripe for redemption.[7]

We might assume that Berliners felt the way their city looked: beaten, defeated, due for demolition. Instead, the 44-year-old diarist experienced a 'frenzy of expectation', and not only within herself. She saw the whole city as being ready to get to work at full steam. Ruth Andreas-Friedrich had, along with her boyfriend Leo Borchard, been a founding member of the small 'Onkel Emil' resistance group.. At the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem she is honoured as 'Righteous Among the Nations'. So it wasn't just hard-hearted Germans who wanted to plunge themselves into work, it wasn't just those incapable of mourning. Hitler's suicide was only two months in the past, and already Berlin – in Ruth's words – wanted to be back 'at the centre of the action', it wanted to revive, and it wanted to be forgiven.

Behind that wild yearning for a new start lies the end of an inferno of which many had witnessed only a tiny part. Meanwhile the next generation of historians was already at work, trying to make the extent of the horrors halfway comprehensible. They remained unimaginable. No one can grasp the meaning of 60 million war-dead, but there are ways of making the scale more comprehensible. During the bombings in the summer of 1943, 40,000 people died in the Hamburg firestorm – a hell that buried itself deep in the nation's memory because of its savagery. It took the lives of about 3 per cent of the city's population. As terrible as these events were, the overall percentage of victims across Europe was more than twice as high. The war cost 6 per cent of all Europeans their lives. The scale of the catastrophe that befell Hamburg applied twice as much to Europe as a whole. In Poland a sixth of the population was killed, some 6 million people. Jews suffered the worst; in their families they counted not the dead but the survivors.

The historian Keith Lowe writes:

> Even those who experienced the war, who witnessed massacres, who saw fields full of dead bodies and mass graves brimming with corpses are unable to comprehend the true scale of the killing that took place in Europe across the war.[8]

That much was certainly true immediately after the end of the war. The chaos that citizens discovered as they emerged from their air-raid shelters with their arms raised was already quite enough to bear. How could anything come out of this calamity, particularly in Germany, which was to blame for it all?

But 26-year-old Wolfgang Borchert, who would be known to posterity as a dark master of lamentation, tried to turn the burden of survival into an emphatic manifesto of his generation. Borchert had been conscripted into the Wehrmacht in 1941 and sent to the Eastern Front. There he had been punished several times for 'statements subversive of national defence'. Severely traumatised by his experiences at the front and in prison, and by liver disease that went untreated, he returned from Frankfurt to his home city of Hamburg in 1945, having escaped transportation to a prisoners-of-war camp, walking a total of 600 kilometres. There he wrote the short essay 'Generation without Farewell'. In it, with wild resolution, he sang of the arrival of a generation whose past had been literally blown to pieces. That past was – and this is the meaning of the title – no longer available to the psyche, whether because it was unimaginable, or because of traumatisation or repression. 'Generation without Farewell' is a manifesto of Zero Hour:

> We are the generation without ties and without depth. Our depth is an abyss. We are the generation without happiness, without a home and without farewell. Our sun is narrow, our love cruel, and our youth is without youth.[9]

Borchert's rhapsodic text, hammering monotonously on, is powerfully disorienting. Not without a certain pride, he stylises a disposition

of wayward coldness. This young generation, he suggests, has bidden farewell to the dead too often to be able to respond emotionally to a farewell anymore; in fact those farewells are 'legion'. The last lines of the text are an account of the strength that even this fatally ill young man imagined he could summon for the future:

> We are a generation without a homecoming, because we have nothing that we could come home to. But we are a generation of arrival. Perhaps we are a generation filled with arrival on a new star, in a new life. Filled with arrival under a new sun, to new hearts. Perhaps we are filled with arrival to a new life, to a new laughter, a new God. We are a generation without farewell, but we know that all arrival belongs to us.

'Generation without Farewell' is the poetic declaration of a generation who felt themselves to be superfluous. In it, the shocking refusal of many Germans to wonder how it could all have happened is elevated to a movement. The slate of experience is wiped clean, freed up for a new style of writing, 'a new God'. An arrival on a new star. The word 'repression' would be an understatement here – it is a conscious refusal. It is an emphatic new beginning, marking a bitter end with the past. Of course, Wolfgang Borchert was well aware that the *tabula rasa* is an illusion. He didn't need anyone to explain to him how tormenting memories can be. Forgetting was the utopia of the moment.

The poem 'Inventory' by Günter Eich, written late in 1945, became famous in Germany and assumed the status of a manifesto for Zero Hour. In it a man lists his possessions, his equipment for the new beginning.

> This is my cap,
> this is my coat,
> here are my shaving things
> in their linen case.
> [. . .]

In the bread bin are
a pair of woollen socks
and some things that I
will reveal to no one.
[. . .]
This is my notebook,
this my strip of canvas,
this my towel,
this is my thread . . .

'Inventory' became the watchword for post-war literature because of its provocatively laconic quality. The 'clear-cutting' writers, as they called themselves, opposed florid prose because they felt betrayed by it, having once used it themselves. Their capacity for enthusiasm lay in ruins as well. From now on they planned to keep things as simple

*Don't turn around, look straight ahead. A small family gazes towards the future. Behind them the remains of Munich.*

as possible, and to stick to intimate, private subjects, to the things they could spread out on the table – a lyrical proclamation for which the sociologist Helmut Schelsky would, in 1957, coin the phrase 'the sceptical generation'.[10] Günter Eich's poetic inventory avoids memory: with only mistrust, as well as a coat, notebook and thread (and something 'that I will reveal to no one' – a phrase admitting deliberate repression that is perhaps the key to the whole poem), he enters his new life.

Marta Hillers also drew up an inventory in her diary. It has become famous because of the clear-eyed openness with which she describes the wave of rapes that followed the arrival of the Red Army. She experienced Zero Hour as a regime of sexual violence that lasted for days. When it was finally over, on 13 May, she took stock:

> On the one hand things are good for me. I'm fresh and healthy. I have not suffered any physical harm. I have the feeling that I am excellently equipped for life, as if I had webbed feet for the mud. I am adapted to the world, I'm not delicate. [. . .] On the other side there are only minuses. I no longer know what I'm supposed to do in the world. I'm indispensable to no one. I'm just standing around, waiting, I can see neither goal nor task before me.

She runs through a number of possibilities: going to Moscow, becoming a Communist, becoming an artist. She rejects everything.

> Love? Lies trampled on the ground. Perhaps art [. . .]? Yes, for those who have the calling, but I don't. I'm just an ordinary labourer, I have to be satisfied with that. All I can do is connect with my small circle and be a good friend. What's left is just to wait for the end. Still, the dark and amazing adventure of life beckons. I'll stick around, out of curiosity, and because I enjoy breathing and stretching my healthy limbs.[11]

And Friedrich Luft? The theatre critic who climbed out of the basement at the end of April with his white armband and walked towards the Russian soldiers was still in Berlin too, his curiosity unsated. He

wrote regular pieces for the magazine section of the Berlin *Tagesspiegel*, founded in September 1945. He wrote about the stimulating flow of the city, the fine spring clothes collections, the tension of waiting for the postman's arrival in the morning. Luft became the 'voice of criticism' at RIAS Radio in West Berlin. Between February 1946 and October 1990, just before his death, he ended each of his weekly broadcasts with words that dripped like honey into the souls of his audience, promising dependability: 'We'll talk again in a week. As always. Same time, same band, same place.'

Luft spent many more years living with his wife, a draughtswoman, in the house from whose basement he had climbed in 1945. In the early seventies Heide Luft often took herself to a bar on Winterfeldtplatz, not far from their house. The bar was called Ruin. And it wasn't just in name, it was one: the front of the building was bombed out, but parts of the foundation were still standing, forming a bizarre little beer garden within their jagged walls. The bar was in the building to the rear and was always full to the rafters. A tree grew out of the rubble-covered basement in the front building, and a few lanterns hung from its branches. In the early seventies the bar was a meeting point for people who wanted to be poets. Most of them were students. It still looked as if the war had just ended. While her husband sat at home working on his reviews for the radio, Frau Luft sat in her elegant fur coat among the long-haired people, chatting a little, always bright and non-committal, occasionally buying a round. She was one of many who liked to go back to Zero Hour, each in their own way.

# II

# *In Ruins*

## Who's going to clear all that up again? Rubble clearance strategies

The war had left about 500 million cubic metres of rubble behind. To help people visualise the amount, they undertook all kinds of calculations. The *Nürnberger Nachrichten* took the Zeppelin field at the Reich Party rally grounds as its benchmark. Piled up in that space, 300 metres by 300, the rubble would have produced a mountain 4,000 metres high, topped with perpetual snow. Others imagined the Berlin ruins, calculated as having a volume of 55 million cubic metres, as a wall 30 metres wide and 5 metres high and stretching westwards, reaching all the way to Cologne. These were the sort of notions used to help people grasp the enormous quantities of debris that needed to be cleared away. No one who stood in cities such as Dresden, Berlin, Hamburg, Kiel, Duisburg or Frankfurt, whole districts of which had been completely destroyed, could possibly have imagined how the detritus could ever be removed, let alone the cities reconstructed. There were 40 cubic metres of rubble for each surviving resident of Dresden.

Of course the rubble didn't appear in such a compact form; the wreckage spread in city-wide expanses in the form of fragile and precarious ruins. Anyone who lived amidst them, often with only three out of four walls remaining and the roof open to the sky, first had to crawl through high piles of rubble and risk venturing through the

free-standing remains of walls to get home. Individual walls were often the height of the façade, without supporting side walls, and threatened to collapse at any moment. Masonry swayed overhead on twisted iron girders and whole concrete floors protruded from a single wall, while children played below.

There was, in fact, every reason to despair, but most Germans couldn't afford even a brief moment of despondency. On 23 April 1945, before the war was even officially over, the municipal bulletin for the south-western city of Mannheim already published its proclamation: WE ARE REBUILDING.

> We can only do this quite modestly for the time being, because mountains of rubble need to be removed before we can locate land to build on. The best thing to do is to start removing the rubble, and, as the old saying goes, to start outside your own front door. We will manage. It will be hard when someone lucky enough to have come home stands outside his shattered dwelling, which he would once more like to make his home. In that case much hammering and carpentry will need to be done, using skills acquired over many years, before the place is habitable once again. [. . .] Self-help is only a possibility when one has access to roofing felt and tiles. If as many people as possible are to be helped as quickly as possible, anyone who still has roofing material left over from previous work will have to deposit these at the appropriate district construction office forthwith. [. . .] In this way we want to rebuild very modestly at first, step by step, so that windows and roofs are closed up again, and then we will see what happens next.[1]

Huge quantities of British bombs had rained down on Mannheim, destroying half of the city's houses, but thanks to an effective system of basement air-raid shelters only 0.5 per cent of the population had perished. This may perhaps explain the strange glee with which hammering and carpentry are depicted, almost as an idyllic bout of DIY. But in other cities, too, people set about clearing things up with an enthusiasm that might have appeared macabre to outsiders.

*'Erst mal wieder Grund reinbringen'* – First re-establish your foundations – was the motto; literally, the phrase means 'find a piece of land'. Surprisingly quickly, an initial order was created amidst the chaos of the ruins. Narrow passages were cleared, where people could make their way easily through the rubble. In the collapsed cities a new topography of beaten paths came into being. Cleared oases appeared in the deserts of rubble. In some places people had cleaned the streets so conscientiously that the cobblestones gleamed as if they were brand new, while on other pavements pieces of rubble were stacked on top of one another, meticulously sorted by size. In Freiburg, in Baden, south-west Germany, which always had a reputation for being spick and span – 'Freiburg city / Is nice and clean and pretty', as the nineteenth-century author Johann Peter Hebel had it – the loose rubble was piled so carefully at the feet of the ruins that the apocalyptic setting almost started looking habitable again.

A photograph taken by Werner Bischof in 1945 shows a man walking alone through this cleanly swept hell. He is wearing his Sunday best, we see him from behind, a black hat pushed back on to the back of his neck, his jodhpurs stuffed into his knee-high boots, which in combination with his elegant jacket gives him the appearance of a cavalry captain. He is carrying a wicker basket in his hand, as if he is strolling to the shops, which earned the picture the unofficial title 'Man in Search of Something Edible'. His gait is practically impudent; his posture suggests optimism and resolve, and together with the attentively upward-looking angle of his head, curiously taking in the surrounding area, gives a poignant sense of someone who has ended up in the wrong film.

The Germans had had a lot of time to get used to the devastation. Since the first bombing raids in 1940 they had been forced to clear their cities after repeated attacks, and patch them up as best as they could. But then they had masses of POWs and forced labourers at their disposal, whom they deployed for the hard labour under inhuman conditions. In the last months of the war no one counted precisely how many had died in the process. But after the end of the war the Germans had to do that work themselves for the first time.

What better solution than to enlist the very people who had instigated the disaster in the first place? In the first weeks after the war ended, so-called 'Party Member deployments' were organised; former Nazi Party members were pressed to work to help remove the rubble. In Duisburg in early May posters announced that ex-Party members were ordered to 'clear away street obstacles'. 'They must be removed immediately by Party members, friends and sponsors of the Nazi clique. Those summoned to comply must provide their own suitable tools.'[2] The summons was accompanied by the threat: 'If you fail to appear, freed political prisoners will make sure that you do.'

These enlistment orders had not been issued by the British military occupying authority nor by the mayor of Duisburg. The signatory was a 'Reconstruction Action Committee', a front for a so-called 'Anti-Fascist Committee', a coalition of anti-Nazis who wanted to take denazification and reconstruction into their own hands in a non-bureaucratic way. Unlike in many cities, where the Anti-Fascist Committees initially worked in collaboration with the city administrations, the mayor of Duisburg saw the punitive action by the citizens' committee as an illegitimate assumption of power. He tried to cancel the labour deployments with posters of his own, but was thwarted by the confusion of events: the self-appointed 'Reconstruction Action Committee' actually managed to conscript a considerable number of former Nazi Party members for their repeated Sunday forced labour campaigns.

While such punishments imposed by citizens' committees on former Nazi Party members might not have been the rule, the example of Duisburg shows that Germans were quite capable of taking matters of justice and retribution into their own hands, and were not the stubborn and homogeneous mass of some later accounts. But more importantly, the process was typical of the administrative chaos of the first post-war months. As soon as they had conquered a region, the Allies automatically removed the existing mayors from office and quickly appointed new ones in order to maintain a minimum of order. Ideally, they tried to find the people who had occupied the post

prior to 1933, or brought in former social democrats. Sometimes German citizens volunteered, for a great variety of reasons, some of them idealistic. Often these individuals only remained in the post for a few days before objections were raised by the recently constituted offices dealing with denazification.

In Frankfurt the journalist Wilhelm Hollbach held the job of mayor for a comparatively long time: 99 days. He had reached the top of the city administration by pure chance; immediately after Germany's capitulation he called on American headquarters in the city to request permission to found a newspaper. The sooner the better, he had thought. Hollbach was not granted that authorisation, but, fortunately for the city of Frankfurt, the military instead offered him the city's highest office. They had been racking their brains trying to think of somebody for the role when Hollbach had burst in. As soon as he was in office he carefully laid the basis for a rubble recycling corporation, which, though it started relatively late, was all the more efficient for it.

The writer Hans Fallada – famed for novels such as *Alone in Berlin* and *Little Man, What Now?* – who was fast-tracked into the mayoral office in the small lakeside town of Feldberg in the northern state of Mecklenburg, was not so lucky. Initially the Russians had wanted to lock him up or even shoot him because someone had discarded an SS uniform in his garden. But under questioning he, somehow, seemed like exactly the right person to get the village's businesses running. So, at just a moment's notice, the notorious drinker and morphine addict Fallada found himself responsible for resolving disputes between farmers, villagers and occupiers. In most cases this involved the confiscation of provisions and the organisation of work details. After four months he collapsed under the burden of these thankless tasks, was put in hospital in Neustrelitz and, particularly since his underlings had in the meantime looted his house, never went back to Feldberg.[3]

While the wartime mayors and other administrative heads were initially dismissed, mid- and low-ranking clerks and officials generally remained in their positions. This meant that the Allied military

administrations were able to rely on established administrative practices. Chaos and routine were kept in balance. While it remained unclear how Germany would evolve, at least officials knew what procedures to follow.

The depth of the devastation felt by these officials contrasted strangely with the efficiency of their administrative abilities. The offices concerned with clear-up operations, with names like 'Office for Large-Scale Clearance', 'Rubble Office', 'Clearance Office' or 'Rebuilding Office'[4] were no different to those in place before the end of the war. They operated according to the principle: if there were forced labourers only yesterday, there will be new ones again today, we just need to requisition them. Somebody has to get rid of this rubbish, after all. This time the rubble-clearers weren't Russian prisoners of war or Jewish forced labourers, but rather German ex-soldiers – which didn't matter much to the officials who were concerned only with the end result. So they no longer enlisted their workforce from the SS, as they had done previously, but from American or British military offices, who willingly handed over their German prisoners of war.[5] How must those officials have felt? Were they indifferent? Did they suffer pangs of conscience? There was no reason for them to be guilt-stricken, because as difficult as life in the Allied internment camps might have been, the German prisoners of war there were not maltreated as the Russians and Jews had been under the SS. Their deaths had certainly not been factored in, or indeed turned into the whole point of the exercise, as had been the case in the Nazi concentration camps.

As elsewhere, in the gigantic mountains of rubble in Berlin, clearance became a form of punishment. In the very first days after the invasion, volunteers had been recruited with the promise of a plate of soup after work. But soon the labour was made compulsory for ex-Nazi Party members. These were easy to find, because Berlin's Nazi district office had only interrupted its work for a few days during the final battle for the city. The clerks and officials in Berlin were overseen by the 'Ulbricht Group', a group of exiled members of the Communist Party of Germany, led by future German Democratic

Republic (GDR) leader Walter Ulbricht, and other returning communist emigrants who had arrived with the Red Army to reorganise city life and reinforce confidence in the Russian administration. They were aided in tracking down Party members by a system of house and street representatives that was installed in the first days of the occupation. For example, the district offices organised 'voluntary' work details. 'Anyone who doesn't come and shovel will get no ration cards!' The house and street representatives were told to 'ensure that everyone has an occupation, nobody can stand around and the work has to be done quickly so that the workers don't catch cold'. In Berlin-Mitte there are said to have been 13,000 such people, in Friedrichshain 8,000 and in Weissensee 3,000.

Among the first draftees was the 18-year-old secretary Brigitte Eicke. A former member of the League of German Girls (the girls' wing of the Nazi youth movement), Brigitte had joined the Party just before the collapse of the regime, and for that reason she was made to join the 'Nazi Special Operation'. On 10 June 1945 she recorded in her diary:

> We had to turn up at Esmarchstrasse at 6.30 in the morning. I'm always surprised that our leaders and the girls from our district who were also in the Party, like Helga Debeaux, are never here, and they seem to know how to duck out of things. The unfairness is appalling. We had to go to Weissensee station, but it was already far too crowded there, so they marched us back to the promenade. It's full of rubble and dirt to above our heads. We even found human bones in it. We shovelled there until midday, then lunch until two, then working again. And today the weather is so glorious, everyone is taking a walk and going past us. [. . .] We were supposed to go on working until 10 o'clock at night. It's a terribly long time, particularly when you're on display like that. We always kept our backs turned to the street so that we couldn't see the smirking faces. Sometimes you would have wanted to cry, if there weren't always some people there who managed to keep their sense of humour and managed to make others laugh.[6]

Of course it was clear to both the Berlin building authorities and the military administration that 55 million cubic metres of rubble couldn't be shifted with punishment operations alone, and construction companies were brought in to professionalise the rubble clearance. According to their political affiliation they were either conscripted or commissioned for hire. All four occupied zones employed building labourers who toiled away in the stony deserts in return for a small wage, but most importantly for the much sought after hard-labour food coupons.

The *Trümmerfrauen* – the 'rubble women' – developed into a kind of post-war fairy tale. Contrary to what is generally believed today, they were not nearly as prevalent outside of Berlin, but in the capital city hard labour was predominantly women's work.[7] At the height of the clearance work in Berlin 26,000 women were working, and only 9,000 men. After hundreds of thousands of soldiers had fallen or been taken prisoner, the shortage of men was more noticeable in Berlin than elsewhere, even though before the war Berlin had been Germany's capital city for single women. They had fled from the constrictions of the provinces into the big city to breathe the smell of petrol and freedom, and to be able to live independently in new women's professions. Now working as a building labourer was the only way to get hold of something better than the minimum food coupon that barely kept a person from starvation with its seven daily grams of fat.

In the west of the country, by contrast, fewer women were employed in rubble clearance and typically only as punishment, as part of denazification or disciplinary measures against 'degenerate girls and women with frequently changing sexual partners'. That the rubble women would later be remembered in Germany as mythical heroines of reconstruction, despite their pasts, is due to the inspirational sight of them in the fields of ruins. If the devastation was already photogenic, the rubble women made it even more so. In the frequently published photographs we see the women standing in long rows on the mountains of rubble. Some of them wear aprons, some dresses with hefty working boots poking out beneath them. Often they wear headscarves, knotted at the front in tractor-driver style.

Trümmerfrauen *became mythical figures of the post-war era, not least because they were so photogenic. Here they are working in front of the Yenidze cigarette factory in Dresden.*

Standing like this they formed bucket chains, passing the rubble from hand to hand, clearing it from the ruins on to the street, where it was sorted and cleaned by children.

These images etched themselves into people's minds because the bucket brigades offered an excellent visual metaphor for the sense of solidarity that the broken-down German society urgently needed. What a contrast: here the crumbled ruins, there the cohesion of the bucket chain. Thus, the reconstruction was given a heroic aspect with which many Germans could gratefully identify, and which they felt they could be proud of in spite of the defeat.

Some rubble women stuck out their tongues defiantly at the photographers, or turned their noses up at the cameramen. The fact that some of them wore strikingly elegant dresses which, with their white collars and light floral fabrics, were completely unsuited to dirty work, was usually down to the fact that these were the only items of clothing they had. Anyone who had gone down to the air-raid shelter or been evacuated had always taken their best clothes with them. The