Searching for Peace in Cold War Germany

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The interpreter warned us about getting into East Berlin. "They'll probably hold you an hour," he predicted. "Normally, it would be a half hour but they're in a bad mood because of Brezhnev."

The Soviet leader had died two days before and bleak predictions circulated about how the shock, along with West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's fall from power earlier in the year, would affect East-West relations. None of this changed our minds. A peace meeting would be starting at an obscure church on the other side of the Berlin Wall in a little more than an hour. We didn't have the exact address and knew only a few German phrases. But the journey was worth the risk.

Harro, the lanky blonde interpreter who was squiring us around, gently discouraged the idea. The East Germans would scalp us each for 25 marks, force us to exchange them at par for Eastern marks worth only a quarter as much. Once we returned the money would be worthless. And if we didn't make it back across the border by midnight, we could be thrown in jail.

Quite a way to spend our second night in in the country.

West Berlin squatters reclaimed abandoned buildings.

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In November 1982, at the height of the Reagan era, in what felt like Cold War II, Robin Lloyd and I joined a delegation organized by The Nation. Despite a prediction by Sid Lens, one fellow traveler and senior editor of The Progressive at the time, that we would never even find our destination, crossing east seemed better than watching a transvestite nightclub act. That was the entertainment choice offered by our hotel. We set out for the train carrying only some money, passports, a map and a phrase book.

An East German journalist had brought up the meeting earlier that day. "You can only see the peace movement when people assemble," he explained. The meeting was one of about 2,000 being held during a ten-day period called the annual "Peace Decade." All the events were being held in churches, institutions that had become the motor for a new movement.

In response to a renewed militarization of daily life, thousands of East Germans were gathering. Some had signed the Berliner Appeal, a letter calling for an end to military training and a peace curriculum in the schools. Others wore pacifist armbands — even after they were banned by the state and replaced with government-circulated anti-NATO emblems.

The East German government showed open disdain for the pacifist drift of the activities, according to the journalist who gave us the tip. "In the GDR," he said, "the official meaning of peace is 'peace must be armed'." Yet after the 1979 NATO decision to deploy more than 100 Pershing missiles in West Germany, both East and West Germans saw the threat.

> "People felt that war was a real possibility," explained the writer. And so, reaction in the East grew within the only autonomous organizations in the country – churches.
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> With the border minutes away I reviewed what I'd heard over the last 24 hours. West Berliners were worried about the "tough words from the White House," Alex Langolios said. Alex was deputy speaker of the Berlin Parliament and a Social Democrat. "We're nervous when we hear about winning a nuclear war."

He talked up East-West cooperation, a guarded interdependence in relation to trade, and the need to fight fear on both sides of the Wall. This Social Democrat sounded very much like an American Democrat. Echoing their warnings about the Reagan agenda, he suggested that relations could deteriorate further with the Christian Democrats taking the reins.

In West Berlin, the Christian Democratic Party had been in control since the recent local elections. Here and elsewhere, the attraction of Social Democratic liberalism had faded with the failure of Germany's "economic miracle." The economy had stopped growing, national unemployment was over two million, and the government was resorting to debt financing. In Berlin, unemployment was over 8 percent, and up to 15 percent among the young. There were over 10,000 vacant apartments in the city, a result of both speculation and years of neglect. Yet 50,000 people were looking for homes.

In recent years, the city's population had dropped by about 300,000 to 1.9 million, despite aggressive attempts to lure new industry, subsidies from the national government, and even a legal loophole that allowed young people to defer military service as long as they lived in West Berlin. On the other hand, what had grown was the number of squatters and Turkish

guest workers, the latter exacerbating the unemployment situation.

"Berliners think this city is the center of the world," Langolios confided. Still, he had to admit that social stress was bringing the viability of the center into question.

The story was similar across the country. After 15 years with Social Democrats in charge, the consensus had cracked. Economic stagnation, combined with the cumulative strain of being a front line state in the struggle between East and West, became too much for Chancellor Schmidt. In late September, his coalition partners, the Free Democrats, had called for severe budget cutting. Before the issue was resolved, the small party — representing less than ten percent of the national vote, with support mainly from entrepreneurs and professionals – deserted the Social Democrats and joined with the Christian Democrats to topple the government.

The center split and the fate of the nation was up for grabs.

Getting through customs turned out to be no problem. The East Berlin officials barely glanced at our passports before issuing temporary visas and collecting a five mark entry fee. Minutes later we were on a windy street looking for directions to Auferstehung Kirchengemeinde, the Church of the Resurrection, where one of the peace meetings was already underway. About 55 similar gatherings had already taken place during the last week in East Berlin alone.

 Flags were at half-mast in honor of Brezhnev. Otherwise it felt like a "normal" night as we hailed a cab. For five marks the driver took us out of the neon-lit central district, past a 20-foot portrait of Lenin, to a dark street, and pointed to a barely visible building across the wide road.

Banned peace symbol

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Inside the church, in a modest chapel, about 70 people were listening to a dialogue between a young pacifist churchman and a burly spokesman for the Christian Democratic Party – in

this case an East German satellite of the Communist Party hoping to appeal to the religious. After a while Robin stood up to deliver a short speech in German. She offered good wishes, a peace button and a photo collection chronicling the massive disarmament march and rally in New York the previous June.

"Speak English," someone yelled.

When we explained that we couldn't follow the discussion, a young man volunteered to translate. Ret was a garrulous, worldly rebel, a self-described "anarchist not a terrorist," and admirer of the guru Rajneesh. His main complaint about life under socialism was the inability to obtain books about his favorite topics.

After chiding the speakers for talking too long, members of the audience addressed the need to incorporate an ecological perspective in the peace movement and break down "ideological blocks." One voice urged a "revolution of Christians, without weapons, a non-aggressive approach to break the circle."

The churchman at the head table offered support. "There are many ways to the goal," he said. "We must try to see every possibility. There are many faces of pacifism in this city." But the Party spokesman objected that "the situation is too dangerous. We must work together, for there will be no weeping after a nuclear war."

 The dialogue expanded, gradually revealing frustration with official resistance to the peace movement. Most people were in their twenties and thirties, sober-looking men and women dressed in work clothes. Sitting directly across from us, however, was a young woman who looked as if she had been airlifted in from downtown West Berlin. Chains and safety-pins adorned her blue jeans, going well with her orange hairdo. Her jacket featured a handmade version of the banned symbol of the pacifist peace movement, a man hammering a sword into a plowshare.

She and her boyfriend, wearing denim and a collection of Western buttons, were reminders of the influence of Western media on the East. Their wardrobes were statements of revolt that could easily provoke police persecution. There was no youth culture on this side of the Wall to provide cover for such defiance.

The group in the church wasn't anti-socialist, but there were serious complaints about the government's approach to peace. "We want one peace movement in all the world," said one man, "but we want it to be creative." Another challenged the party spokesman to explain, "Why are there lessons for war and not for peace?" This was a reference to the military curriculum in schools and the military camps youngsters had to attend during holidays.

The party man tried to steer discussion back to what he called "objective" issues, urging

mutual respect and obedience to the law. It just isn't possible for anyone to simply make a placard and parade in the streets, he advised. This increased the anger growing in the audience. In response, the church spokesman urged that his institution become "a forum for the whole society to discuss these issues."

Sensing that things were careening out of control, the moderator called for a ten-minute recess.

As we headed for the hall, a silent observer at the back of the chapel handed me a calling card. It read: Lynn J. Turk, Second Secretary and Vice Consul, American Embassy. He was a diplomat, he said, assigned to study the East German peace movement, and offered to fill us in before providing an escort us back across the border.

At a comfortable apartment, with his South Korean wife listening, Turk traced the emergence of the East German peace movement to the 1979 NATO "double track" decision. The two "tracks" were a) negotiations for nuclear arms reductions, and b) deployment of Cruise and Pershing missiles if those negotiations fell through. After the announcement, the churches had geared up to protest.

But the movement hadn't blossomed until 1981, when about 6,000 people met across the street from a bombed out church ruin in Dresden on the anniversary of the devastating 1945 US attack on that city. West German television recorded the '81 event, beaming it back east. At about the same time Pastor Rainer Eppelmann initiated what became known as the Berliner Appeal.

The Appeal called for the prohibiting of military toy sales, the outlawing of military training, peace information in the schools — including study of peaceful solutions to conflict, ecology and psychology, no retaliation against those who refused military service, and no more military demonstrations at festivals or national holidays.

According to Turk, the Appeal campaign was being eroded by government repression. The plowshares symbol had been banned and replaced by the state, and non-Christian activists were being pressured into exile or silence. But the crackdown still stopped at the doors of the church. The reason for this tolerance, he theorized, was that "repression here would damage the West German peace movement, confirming the West's view of the East."

Though claiming he opposed first strike weapons, Turk viewed the East as a serious military threat and East Germany as a totalitarian society whose rulers only allowed peaceniks to

meet for the most cynical of reasons. He meanwhile claimed that the Soviets had stationed tactical nuclear weapons in East Germany, a piece of likely disinformation I was unable to confirm in any with any government official or activist.

Minutes before midnight we arrived at Checkpoint Charlie. From Turk's car I could see the eight-foot corrugated fence, and beyond it the cement-covered no man's land known as the Wall. To make certain no one escaped, rumor had it, the East Germans even checked under the cars with mirrors.

Turk urged us to ask East German officials why the Wall was still up. "They'll say it's an anti-fascist wall," he predicted, implying that the real reason was that most people would race across the border if given the chance. When I finally did question an East German bureaucrat about this, he said the wall had been erected – and was maintained – to prevent black market destabilization of the economy, along with an exodus of East German professionals lured by higher pay on the other side.

After 15 minutes the border guard returned our passports, but chided us for not returning by the same route we'd used to enter. On the other hand, he barely looked inside the vehicle before lifting the metal gate to let us pass and I could see no evidence of mirrors on the ground.

A New Political Culture

When an old West Berlin factory complex in Kreuzberg was slated for demolition in 1979, squatters moved into the empty front apartments to save it and an alternative community was born. Over the next few years the Kerngehause squatters held a consortium of speculators at bay and launched a variety of collective projects. By 1982, groups living and working out of the address were running food and taxi coops, a metal shop, language and alternative energy groups, a self-help health project, as well as a theater and a rock group.

The squatters, who paid rent into an escrow account used for renovations, were part of a citywide alternative culture. Kerngehause was one of many attempts to deal with unemployment and emotional alienation by developing a dual economic and social structure. Although not all squatter houses were as evolved, most shared a tradition of open revolt against conventional lifestyles and exploitative relations.

Berlin's alternative movement developed in the '70s as many college-educated young people realized that "over industrialized" Germany provided too few jobs while restricting

personal choice. They formed collectives, started an alternative daily newspaper, set up their own bank, and gradually entered electoral politics. The squatters, about 2,000 clustered at more than 130 locations, dramatically illustrated the style of the movement. While police squads swooped down on some houses, groups liberated new locations, remodeling and improving their dwellings. When electricity was cut off, they surreptitiously tied into cables.

The links between groups were informal, yet an attitude of solidarity brought them together for demonstrations, cultural happenings and mutual aid. They were part of a broad alliance of peace, anti-nuclear, women's and cultural groups.

The movement's center was Kreuzberg, a crumbling neighborhood that still showed scars of wartime bombing. It had since become a haven for the young and many of the city's 120,000 Turkish guest workers, as well as a stronghold for the Alternative Liste, a new political movement with representation in the local parliament.

An enormous chasm separated the values of the Alternatives from the lifestyles of mainstream Berlin. The collectivist ethics, the desire to reintegrate life and work, the dedication to a no-growth, small scale economy were foreign to most Berliners. In some respects, in fact, West Berlin was more American than some US cities, a neon wonderland, a pumped-up conspicuous consumption society, and a high-tech haven where conservative feathers were ruffled mainly by the sex shops along the main drags.

 The Alternatives had nevertheless made a dent, here and elsewhere in Germany. Expressing its agenda mainly through the Green Party, the movement had effectively raised a variety of environmental issues, winning representation in a half dozen regions. It had begun with massive protests against nuclear power plants and unnecessary demolitions, mushrooming into a nationwide political alliance which aimed at halting nuclear weapons deployment and unlimited economic growth.

I'd seen some of the most visible signs — painted buildings in squatter zones. Before leaving the city I wanted to get behind the walls. A theater production at Kerngehause provided the opportunity; the Ratibor Theater was presenting "Banal," a punk-rock collection of satirical skits about the foibles of middle class life.

 A youthful four-person cast played the instruments, performed pantomime, used high-tech toys as props, and displayed various symbols of mass society to demonstrate their apparent contempt for consumerism and the sexual games of the straight world. The music sounded a bit like Elvis Costello. After two hours the performance ended with a dreamy swimming sequence, possibly symbolizing a freer lifestyle. The actors glided in slow motion as the

audience waved an enormous plastic canopy overhead.

A few days and hundreds of miles later, in the industrial city of Dortmund, a Green Party member put the alternative movement into perspective. "We're trying to develop a new political culture," said Lucas Lucasik. "Some of us say we can do something inside the existing system; others speak for fundamental opposition."

Lucas said that neither the peace movement nor the Green Party had yet developed clear solutions to the economic and foreign policy problems confronting the country. But he reminded me that the party itself, only three years old at the time, was being forced to deal with issues that were often beyond the resources and expertise of such a young movement.

"We have problems explaining what we want to voters," he admitted candidly, "especially when Christian Democrats say we aren't democratic, that we don't want to take responsibility, and would make the country ungovernable. We're not running to make a coalition with any party, we are developing our own strong positions. We would lose our supporters if we changed. We don't want to rule. We want to change the whole society."

From Sachsenhausen to Bonn

On a cloudy day we bussed into East Germany for a tour arranged by the Communist government's US Friendship Committee. At Sachsenhausen, a World War II concentration camp about 30 miles outside Berlin, we were greeted by former inmate Werner Handler, a news editor who recounted the horrors of Hitler fascism.

The camp's grounds were crowded with German tourists, but not to take in the museum's memorabilia. They had come instead for army induction ceremonies. Russian troops stood at attention beside German recruits in an open park where the barracks once stood. Handler explained how he had managed, at age 18, to get out of the camp alive, reach Britain, and join the Communist Party.

After the war he was expelled from West Germany for his political leanings and, taking a job at the Voice of the GDR radion station, became a true believer in socialism. When I pressed him about the government crackdown on peace activists and the banning of the Plowshares emblem, he evaded the issue but offered a ride back to town. In his private car, Handler admitted that the government may have been too heavy-handed.

Pacifists are naive, he argued, but argument is preferable to police action.

A Russian soldier observed ceremonies at Sachsenhausen,
a concentration camp that became a memorial park.

At a public gathering two hours later, he reverted to the official line. "For us this pacifist position is an opening for morally disarming education," he charged. The Americans touted the virtues of dissent, while the East Germans saw no need for an independent peace movement. Pointing out that many East German leaders were once in Nazi camps, Handler asserted that, "These men need no pushing to work for peace."

After an exhausting day we piled onto an overnight train bound for the West. By morning we were in Dortmund, a cross between Detroit and Pittsburgh in the industrial heartland. At a nuclear power plant, public relations men treated us to meals, generous portions of statistics, and bureaucratese about the safety of the technology.

"We have plenty of salt caverns for the waste," one expert said.

"Will you take ours then?"

"Sure."

Later, I talked with Greens about the need for nukes and other baseload power sources. The answer wasn't reassuring. "Too much energy is on the market," said Siggie Kock, a chimney sweep. As he saw it, the real problem was the production of too many unnecessary items. Not the type of response geared to inspiring confidence among industrial workers.

Asking the radicals about economics was almost as frustrating as discussing pacifism with the East German authorities. With strong convictions but little more, most Greens argued simply that "neither the capitalist nor the socialist way will work." They were searching for a "third way." What was it? They weren't quite sure yet.

In Koln, after a church/Communist Party peace rally held in front of the cathedral, I pursued the issue with some of the organizers. One of them, a Communist named Christine, offered a thumbnail critique of the Greens. "In ten years they may not exist," she predicted. "They

don't relate to the workers. The women's and other movements are strong, but you can't change anything without the workers."

Christine's vision was that the peace movement would continue to transcend party lines, bringing on a "new moment in history." But she also feared that the rightward drift of the nation might be too much to overcome.

Other Germans expressed doubts about the Greens. "They're very green," Werner Handler joked. "They're very conservative," said a PR man at the power plant. Maybe the critics were correct. Still, they'd managed to build significant local bases of power, define a fresh and revolutionary ecological perspective, and catalyze the nation. Blacklisting was clearly part of the reason that the Communist Party had been marginalized, despite its union ties. The Greens were different; their decentralized, holistic approach was both radical and conservative.

They wanted a fundamental change from a "profit-oriented to a life-oriented order," explained Roland Vogt, a Party co-chair. Using electoral means, fusing the theories of E.F. Schumacher and Ivan Illich with the nonviolence of Gandhi, their goal was to influence the existing system while simultaneously swaying people with their ideas.

During a meeting at the Party's Bonn headquarters, Vogt outlined the strategy: "Our main purpose is to get out of the vicious cycle of nuclear energy and prevent the deployment of Pershing 2 missiles. Representation in the Bundestag would help, but we wouldn't form a coalition. As the weaker partner, I wouldn't propose marriage."

But would the party compromise?

"The base on which you make compromises is when something can be divided. But growth is no longer divisible. It's an all or nothing thing."

The time had come to hear from the other side. At the Konrad Adenauer House, home of the Christian Democratic Party, Deputy Speaker Walter Bruckmann was ready to oblige. The Social Democrats had failed, he said, because their state-oriented solutions were too socialistic. His party was ready to let the market work and free people to solve their own problems.

It sounded very Reagan-esque. "The best social security against a Soviet invasion is a strong military," he said. Willing to pay lip service to the overall good intentions of peace activists at first, he was soon criticizing their "illusions" and pointing out some subversive tendencies — pacifism and communism –that undermined national security.

He ultimately defended the blacklisting of radicals. "We have to protect democracy against our enemies," he explained.

A generation gap was clearly haunting the country. There wasn't much room for dialogue between eco-radicals and Christian conservatives. Not even the peace movement transcended the barrier between older Germans, trapped in a fortress mentality, and a younger generation for whom power was part of the problem.

After listening to Bruckmann I could see the fractures growing, along with more demonstrations, civil disobedience, and perhaps even violence. Millions were coming to grips with the possibility that the birthplace of the last war also could be the flashpoint for

the next.

In East Germany Werner Handler had warned, "Unimaginable things can happen." The same realization was making the peace movement more than a single issue campaign. For many people it was becoming a matter of survival.

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