The Berlin Times

THE GLOBAL NEWSPAPER FROM THE GERMAN CAPITAL

September 2022 Berlin, Germany

A sea change in defense, energy, mobility – and democracy. The way we live now in the big city and beyond

UDO ERDENREICH

THIS CITY IS YOURS

BY DETLEF PRINZ, PUBLISHER

The great American novelist Tom Wolfe would relish telling of his Eureka moment as he looked out the window of his apartment and saw the sprawling metropolis of New York beneath him: "all the different class-levels, the racial tensions, fantastic wealth jostling shank to flank with crushing poverty, all the arterio-sclerotic old men out there, just making money." Yes, that was it, Wolfe thought – and set out to write his first major novel about life in the big city.

On this October 3, German Unity Day, we bring you the newest edition of the *Berlin Times*, the newspaper that tracks this very notion that a modern metropolis like Berlin is a vast canvas, often breathtakingly beautiful and sometimes undeniably ugly, a place where people from all walks of life come together while also sharply disputing matters big and small. It is a city awash in history that lusts for the present while always on the hunt for the future.

We bring you a primer on the state of affairs in the German capital: the nation's rapidly changing tenets of foreign policy shaped by the new realities of a world in turmoil, and one street that encapsulates the clashing perceptions of Berliners old and young, rich and poor, progressive and staid.

We bring you stories of a man collecting bottles on the streets to make ends meet, former refugees helping new ones, a city planner reimagining how we can and want to live, a world-famous clubbing scene revitalized after the pandemic lockdowns – the list goes on. And it's all here for you.

This is Berlin and this is the *Berlin Times*. This is what we do and who we are. This is the paper befitting the metropolis on the Spree.

To everything, turn, turn, turn

Nora Bossong on the vicissitudes of Germany's rendezvous with the *new* world

Does anyone remember those little Styrofoam pellets that were used a while back as loose filler to make sure a package's contents – whether a delicate vase or a hand grenade – were kept intact during transport? Those little pellets have long since been replaced by things like wood shavings, scrap paper and bubble wrap. But those of us who dealt with the pesky things back in the day will easily recall the struggle that ensued after the package was opened. Clinging to everything, the little rascals continued to pop up without warning days, even weeks later – on hats, jacket sleeves, shoes and even items in far-removed drawers.

What does this packaging material have to do with "my" generation of 30- and 40-somethings and the *Zeitenwende,* that "turning point in history" heralded by the chancellor in the Bundestag in February after the Russian invasion of Ukraine? Well, the first thing we should do is acknowledge the Zeitenwende concept for what it initially was, namely a political concept invoked to communicate the need for a fundamental re-think of all things military in the Federal Republic. Intended to soften the blow of this reality, the term functions in ways similar to the Styrofoam pellets used to cushion the contents of a package during shipment. The second thing we need to do is focus on the actual contents of the shipment rather than its packaging. Unsurprisingly, however, it would appear that we're still focused on the pellets, which seem to cling so tightly that we've lost sight of the items in the package.

One item that's definitely in the package is an invoice. It's a bill that itemizes the costs of ignoring security policy issues and dismissing military realities for years, if not decades. It appears that, up until very recently, we've been living in a fantasy world – that is, in a Federal Republic – where security and military concerns never really existed and no longer needed to exist. In other words, we've been living in a country that had become detached from other places and times. We'd simply dreamily drifted off toward an increasingly quixotic peace project.

The last major German public debates concerning the military that I can remember involved the controversies over the Wehrmacht exhibition in the 1990s and the uproar over Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer's "yes" to the mission in Kosovo, which followed in 1999. Fischer had introduced his support for the mission in his speech at the Greens' special party conference in 1999, where the words "nie wieder Krieg, nie wieder Auschwitz" (never again war, never again Auschwitz) echoed in many German minds. Much of the military-related debates that followed, however, whether it was the Good Friday skirmish in Afghanistan or the mounting strategic disorientation of the Bundeswehr, remained the purview of a small group of experts and nerds. On one occasion, a joke about a derelict helicopter was interesting enough to make it into the media.

Admittedly, the deeply disturbing reports spotlighting the right-wing extremist infiltration of parts of the Bundeswehr received major media coverage, but even in this case, the news was interpreted more as a "scandal" and by no means led to any serious reflection on the German military as an institution with a history and a future. In September 2001, the two stand-out discourses of the decade – the look back at the Wehrmacht and the glance forward to German military participation in the sense of its "responsibility to protect" – largely came to a halt. They ceased to receive any thoughtful consideration, at least by a broader public.

And now we come to the matter of "my" generation, although I'd like to avoid sketching a too narrow definition of the term. Ulrike Franke, a security expert only a few years younger than I, recently remarked in *Die Zeit,* a major liberal weekly newspaper, that our generation was – at least in the Federal Republic – too soft to face the security challenges of the present day. To some extent, this hypothesis proved true only eight weeks later, when Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said she felt she'd woken up in a "new world," thereby unwittingly admitting that, until that moment, she hadn't realized what kind of world she'd fallen asleep in.

A journalist who interviewed me in early March told me that she'd immediately called her grandfather. She'd never learned how to deal with war, she said, and she was looking for advice. A friend I met on the street a short time later also told me he'd reached out to his father-in-law, who'd at least lived through the Cold War. That conversation hadn't helped either, he'd admitted.

It's true that members of my generation have experienced war and violence, and that many of them fled to Germany – from Kosovo, Serbia, Iraq, Syria, the list goes on – precisely for those reasons. Still, as a society on the whole, there's no doubting the fact that until recently we had blocked out the idea of war. We successfully talked ourselves into believing in a reality in which wars remained far removed from ourselves in terms of both time and geography.

In a world without war, all it takes to be a pacifist is the act of refusing to pick up a weapon. In a world in which people actually suffer from war and perhaps even lose their lives, things are much more complex and painful. The very things that count as pacifism, at least in a peaceful bubble, can quickly transform into a reprehensible failure to render assistance in non-bubble

Continued on page 2

Transferring knowledge

By Franziska Giffey, Mayor of Berlin

We find ourselves in a new era. The world is currently being challenged by multiple crises: the pandemic, climate change, the energy crisis, inflation, war and the movement of refugees. Every day, news and images related to these crises are broadcast into people's living rooms, raising a lot of questions, uncertainties and fears.

More and more people are realizing that after a long period of growth and security, we are now facing a time of great challenges. Chancellor Olaf Scholz referred to it as a *Zeitenwende,* or sea change.

We have a lot ahead of us, and in times like these it's important that we keep our strengths in mind. These are the things that have gotten us through past crises.

Berlin has had a lot of experience dealing with transformation processes. These processes have always gone hand in hand with a high degree of radical change – from the Weimar Republic to the Nazi dictatorship, World War II and the city's division to the happy turning point of reunification – which we commemorate on this October 3. Transformation is in this city's DNA. One might even say that times of crisis help Berlin focus on what needs to be done. To find local solutions to crises and global challenges, every single day.

In doing so, Berlin can draw on its unique resources – the creativity, progressiveness and innovative power of

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

To everything, turn, turn, turn

times of war. As EU Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Representative Josep Borrell put it last year, "We like the world of Kant, but we live in the world of Hobbes." And if we're really honest about it, we've wasted many additional years not even reading Kant.

I cannot say definitively what "Jana from Kassel" was reading in her own personal attempt to understand the world. The young woman gained nationwide notoriety when she insisted – after handing out flyers, giving speeches and organizing demonstrations for the *Querdenker*, a loose association of Covid-19 deniers and conspiracy theorists – that she "feels like Sophie Scholl," an icon of the anti-Nazi resistance movement who was murdered by the Nazis in 1943. Sadly for her, she failed to even notice the arrogance of her gesture of martyrdom. In this sense, "Jana from Kassel" is a symbol for everything that's gone wrong in Germany's culture of remembrance, not only among the *Querdenker* and their ilk.

In my own history class at school, the teachers had also presented Sophie Scholl to us as a role model, certainly with the best intentions. Yet it was all too easy for the role model to become a figure we ourselves identified with, and for that identification to quickly morph into the presumption that we had internalized the distinction between good and evil and that we ourselves were standing on the firm ground of the morally correct side. Today, if the words "our historical responsibility" have become an empty platitude or, let's say, a cushioning Styrofoam pellet – justifying one thing, then the exact opposite, only to elevate the exalted position of the speaker – then it's because the lessons of the past, no matter how much we studied up on historical events, never managed to truly get through to us. It shows us just how thin the varnish of ethical decency is in every epoch.

We received a package with great delight. I can't say exactly what's in it, but I know it can't be full of pleasant surprises alone. The certainties to which we once adhered regarding ourselves and the world we fell asleep to every night continue to cling to us. We still haven't brushed them off for good. But it's high time we wake up, stop playing with the packaging and see what's actually been delivered.

Nora Bossong is a novelist and poet living in Berlin.

The Berlin Times

Founding executive editor:
Theo Sommer †

LEGAL NOTICE

Publisher
Detlef W. Prinz

Editor-in-chief
Lutz Lichtenberger

Senior Editor
Jonathan Lutes

English Language Editors
Julie Hagedorn, Barbara Serfozo

Senior Art Director
Paul M. Kern

Layout
Gordon Martin

Times Media GmbH
Tempelhofer Ufer 23-24
10963 Berlin, Germany
www.times-media.de
info@times-media.de
Phone +49 30-2150-5400

Printed by
Hurriyet A.S., An der Brücke 20-22
65456 Mörfelden Walldorf, Germany

ISSN 1864-3973

Press deadline: Sept. 9, 2022

Continued from page 1

Transferring knowledge

our capital. Berlin was always a city of the modern age, one in which people faced challenges with remarkable openness, energy and tenacity, and with the idea that when times get tough, we need to pull together.

In addition, in recent decades, Berlin has invested heavily in reinforcing its strengths. That's especially true of its identity as a city of culture and knowledge. Our many colleges, universities and research institutes give us a unique scientific and academic landscape that attracts researchers from all over the world. The opening of the German Heart Center of the Charité in 2030, slated to be Europe's most advanced heart center, will give our health care capital another flagship institution. And the establishment of the WHO Global Hub for Pandemic and Epidemic Intelligence also underscores Berlin's stellar international reputation.

Berlin's particular focus on knowledge transfer has made our city attractive to stakeholders across the entire spectrum of the health care sector. We see this in both the many small medical startups and the large global players, such as Bayer, who have settled here. And Berlin is a top destination for companies working in other economic sectors, as well. With more than 4,000 digital companies, Berlin is home to Europe's largest startup scene.

Moreover, with its unique concentration of creative industries and media companies, Berlin is one of Europe's cultural hubs. International-

LENA GIOVANAZZI

Franziska Giffey

ity, diversity, tolerance and freedom are the essence of our city's brand. Berlin is and will remain a place that captivates the imagination of people from all over the world, and that is probably our city's most important asset. We are relying on all of that now as we navigate the current crises.

When Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his attack on Ukraine, solidarity was our watchword. From the very beginning of the war, Berlin has opened its arms and heart and, together with Brandenburg, has found initial accommodations for around 300,000 people so far. A hundred thousand Ukrainians have found shelter in our capital, and we are doing everything we can to give them prospects for the future. Berliners' solidarity with the refugees is unabated and, as Mayor, that fills me with pride.

The repercussions of the war also include a new urgency surrounding questions of energy security. Berliners are worried about rising energy prices and the uncertain supply. As I see it, the highest priority is to ease the burden on people in the fall and winter by means of targeted measures. The goal is to prevent anyone from falling through the social safety net. We want to help everyone and, at the same time, keep a fair distribution of benefits in mind. We will not leave people to struggle alone.

Because it's important that when we tackle challenges – no matter how big they are – we remember that social harmony and cohesion, as well as our freedom and democracy, must be preserved. That's especially important right now, since we know that these values can come under fire in times of crisis.

And this applies equally to both the national and the international context. That's why dialogue between cities is so important to me, because cities are the key players when it comes to dealing with global challenges. As a city in the heart of Europe, Berlin recognized the significance and the power of international ties decades ago, and is closely connected to other metropolises in many different city partnerships and city networks. This urban diplomacy, cooperation and exchange between the mayors of the world's large cities is vital if we are to overcome global crises and challenges.

In other words, "If Mayors ruled the world" is no longer merely a hypothetical question. Internationally, decisions are made and policies are shaped on this important municipal level. Making this clear, over and over again, is a key task for mayors of global metropolises, and it's a task that I am committed to. In the 800 years of Berlin's history, I am the first woman to take on this role as Mayor, and I'm happy to see women in other metropolises be the first to take on responsibility and to lead. When that happens, the world's large cities send a strong message in support of greater gender equality.

Offering the space for dialogue on this and other discussions of current issues is of paramount importance. I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak to mayors, thought leaders and citymakers from all over the world and to discuss potential solutions to global challenges.

The world needs the answers its cities can provide. Berlin is providing answers for the future as well, so we can best navigate the *Zeitenwende*.

The redeemer

This German life: Erwin Husel is a pensioner who collects bottles on the streets of Berlin to make ends meet | By Mareice Kaiser

Erwin Husel is as integral to my neighborhood as the playground around the corner and the ice cream store next door. I noticed him years ago, but we only got to talking for the first time a few months ago. His major identifiers are a cap, a bike and bags filled with returnable bottles. "I'm not so good on my feet anymore," he says, "but I can manage on my bike." Husel is 86 years old, a pensioner. It's winter in Berlin-Kreuzberg when I approach him on the street for the first time. There's no snow on the ground, but the cold winter air manages to penetrate my coat. I'm angry at myself for forgetting my gloves. Husel isn't wearing any gloves either. A hat, corduroy pants, a sweater and a jacket over that. I can tell by looking at him that he's cold. His hands are dry and wrinkly. The two of us take the returnable bottles out of my bag and put them in his extra-large, reusable *Aldi* bag. He often carries his bottles in several bags that hang on his bicycle. Two up front and two in the back. "You're welcome to keep my bag," I say. But he shakes his head and waves it off.

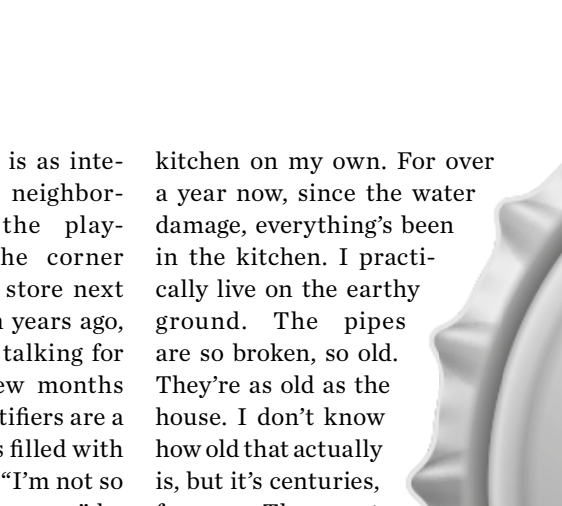
I tell him about my book project, about how I'm writing about money and talking to people who have very little money and people who have a lot of it – and everyone in between. I ask if he'd like to be one of the people I talk to. "Yes, you can tell people my story," he says. I ask him where he would place himself on a scale of having "very little money" or "a lot of money." "I'm a poor devil," he replies.

When Husel speaks, he sometimes seems a bit grumpy. That's pretty common in Berlin. His sense of humor is also quite typical for Berlin – he says "poor devil" with a little grin. Husel lives off of government assistance. He gets €800 per month, €400 of which he spends on rent. He also has an allotment garden he pays €35 per month for. After those costs and basics like food and utilities, there's not much left. In fact, there's nothing left, which is why he started collecting returnable bottles 15 years ago.

Husel points to the daycare center across the street. "That used to be my store," he says. "I bought and sold things." Cupboards, tables, clocks, pictures. It's a typical Berlin store you used to see on every street, but which are now quite rare. When he talks about the old days, Husel tends to wax rhapsodic. There was always lots of action at the store, he says, and his set-up there was "janz jut," "pretty good" in Berlin dialect. That is, until the building was sold off and Husel was forced out. He didn't know where to put all his things, so he brought them all to his apartment, which was on the same street as the store. He's lived there for 40 years. When he mentions the apartment, he lets out a sigh.

Husel speaks in short sentences: "The heating in the apartment is broken. The landlord hasn't done anything about it. And now the washing machine is broken too. But I can't get it out of the kitchen on my own. For over a year now, since the water damage, everything's been in the kitchen. I practically live on the earthy ground. The pipes are so broken, so old. They're as old as the house. I don't know how old that actually is, but it's centuries, for sure. The worst thing is that the washing machine broke. I have to count all my pennies every month. When I have dirty laundry, I go out and do my washing for four marks. The landlord installed a new shower in my apartment. It works, but it takes twenty minutes to get any warm water. I shower at my neighbor's place. The thing I'm most afraid of is getting sick. I'm always on the streets collecting bottles, so I get cold pretty often."

Germany's refundable bottle-deposit system was introduced in 2003. It was designed to prevent people from throwing certain types of disposable packaging away and harming the environment.

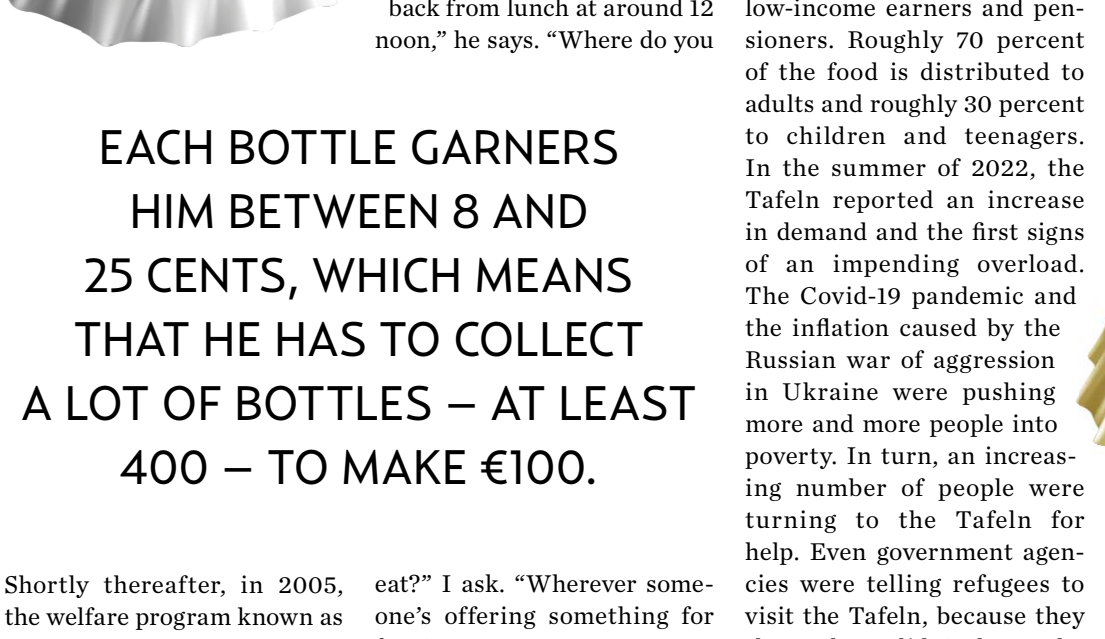


Shortly thereafter, in 2005, the welfare program known as Hartz IV was also introduced in Germany; the result was that more and more people were unable to make ends meet on the money provided to them by the state. After that, the act of collecting refundable bottles off the street became something of a side job for people living in poverty, many of whom are pensioners – pensioners like Erwin Husel, whose income doesn't provide enough to cover rent and living expenses.

Husel makes roughly €100 per month collecting refundable bottles and returning them to the store. "To have or not to have," he says. Each bottle garners him between 8 and 25 cents, which means that he has to collect a lot of bottles – at least 400 – to make €100. Sometimes it's more, sometimes less, explains Husel. "It depends on the weather." Husel collects bottles in all types of weather, usually with the help of his bike. "People are always amazed to see my 85-year-old self trudging through the neighborhood," he says with a touch of pride. He then invites me to visit him at home. "It's something you won't forget for the rest of your life," he warns. We arrange to meet around lunchtime. "I'll be back from lunch at around 12 noon," he says. "Where do you eat?" I ask. "Wherever someone's offering something for free."

EACH BOTTLE GARNERS HIM BETWEEN 8 AND 25 CENTS, WHICH MEANS THAT HE HAS TO COLLECT A LOT OF BOTTLES – AT LEAST 400 – TO MAKE €100.

In the coming days, I think a lot about the fact that we live in a country where there are people living without heating, and a country with people who can't afford to pay their heating bills. Of course, I already knew that there were homeless people in Germany. There are many of them in my own neighborhood. But the fact that there's an 86-year-old pensioner in my direct vicinity who goes to bed with a hot water bottle because he has no functioning heating system – that really gets to me.

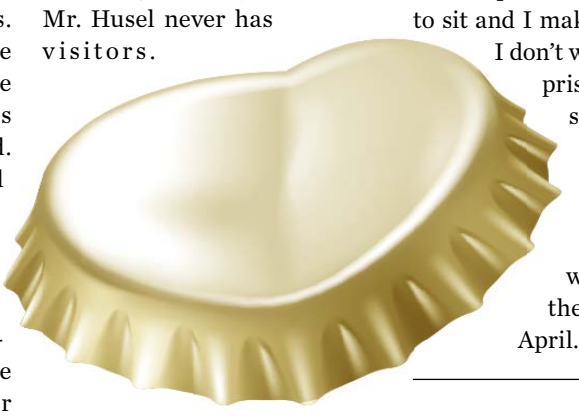


No heating and no money for good food or new clothes – Husel is by no means an isolated case in Germany. In 2019, roughly two million people nationwide were unable to heat their homes. Single parents and people living alone were particularly affected. In that same year, roughly 1.65 million people visited a so-called *Tafel*, a food bank that hands out free meals to the needy.

These Tafeln are funded almost exclusively via donations. Among the most frequent visitors to the Tafel are unemployed persons, low-income earners and pensioners. Roughly 70 percent of the food is distributed to adults and roughly 30 percent to children and teenagers. In the summer of 2022, the Tafeln reported an increase in demand and the first signs of an impending overload. The Covid-19 pandemic and the inflation caused by the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine were pushing more and more people into poverty. In turn, an increasing number of people were turning to the Tafeln for help. Even government agencies were telling refugees to visit the Tafeln, because they themselves didn't have the necessary infrastructure to help, reports Sirkka Jendis, managing director of Tafeln *Deutschland*. This resulted in some Tafeln having to turn away people seeking food, telling them to try again in a few weeks or months.

When Tafeln have no more food to distribute, they sometimes give needy people notes containing the addresses of other food banks they can visit. They tell them to keep the information secret, though, just to make sure those locations don't then experience the same overload. Erwin Husel is familiar with the places where he can get free food. He goes there every day at noon. We meet again on the street, at noon. From far away, I see Husel on his bike. "Hold on a second, I've got to lock it first," he calls out as he rides slowly past. He's got a basket on the back of his bike with a small bag inside. There are no bottles hanging from his handlebars today. Two minutes later, he's back, this time without his bike. Instead, he's got a Tupperware bowl in his hand. What's in it? I ask. "I have no idea," he says. "I eat whatever they give me."

It's not so cold anymore and Erwin Husel is wearing a cardigan and jeans. "Follow me," he says, unlocking the door to his apartment building. We go up one flight of stairs in the turn-of-the-century building. On the door to Husel's apartment hangs a sign with the inscription: "Alle Wünsche werden klein gegen den, gesund zu sein" (tr. All other hopes are unimportant compared to the hope of staying healthy). He asks me to wait a moment and goes into the apartment. I can see through a small crack in the doorway that his hallway is very cluttered. Like a second-hand shop for furniture, except it's an even bigger mess. At that moment, a neighbor about my own age comes down the stairs. She sees the open door and asks: "Is everything OK with Mr. Husel?" "Yeah, everything's fine," I reply. "I'm just visiting." The neighbor says, "Oh my! Mr. Husel never has visitors.



He hasn't let anyone into the apartment for years. Good luck!" She says this in a kind and friendly way, even with a touch of affection, perhaps.

At that moment, Erwin Husel comes back out of his apartment holding an envelope in his hand. "So, this is what everything used to look like." The envelope contains old photos, pictures of the apartment and Husel himself from many years ago. I make my best guess: "Was this back in the 1990s?" He nods. In one picture, he's lying in a big bed, grinning. "That's what it all looked like then," he explains. "Not like the way it is now." It's as if he wants to apologize for the current state of his apartment, as if to say it didn't always look this bad.

"Well, then," he says and opens the door for me. I step into his apartment, very carefully because there's stuff everywhere: furniture, bottles, bags with returnable bottles and the like. This is when I come to understand that his apartment also functions as a temporary storage for his returnable bottles. To the right of the hallway is the living room. "This is where I used to sleep," he says, showing me the picture once again. Today, the room is full of furniture, three grandfather clocks, lots of pictures. "What else am I supposed to do with these things?" asks Husel.

The bedroom is on the other side of the living room. "Go right through," he says to me. But I feel like an intruder. For me, my own apartment is my safe space, the place where people require my permission to enter. And I'm very selective when it comes to who gets in. Husel is obviously quite picky, too, so I don't want to do anything wrong or cross any lines. This is why I only take one small step into the bedroom. "Go ahead," he insists. I look around the corner. There's a lot of furniture in this room, too. Behind a small closet, there's a small – really very small – bed. It's perfectly made and in tip-top shape. There's a small, neatly folded blanket on it and a small pillow at one end. Next to the bed is a hair dryer. "Wow, that's quite tidy," I say. "Of course it is," he replies. "It's my bed, after all, so it has to be spick and span." Then he puts the Tupperware on the bed. "Why do you have a hair dryer there?" I ask. "I use it to warm up the bed in the evening," he explains, adding, when he sees my concerned expression: "It's just a matter of habit."

Back in the living room, we stop next to an old coal stove. Husel shows me the photo of himself in this room again, back when he was younger, when the stove actually worked and all the stuff from his former store wasn't lying around everywhere. It's chilly and a bit stuffy in the apartment. When we decide to go out again – there's no place in the apartment for both of us to sit and I make it known that I don't want to sit on the pristine bed – Husel says: "Today's the first time this year that it's warm enough to open the windows and air the place out." It's April.

Mareice Kaiser is a journalist, author and moderator. Her essay *"Das Unwohlsein der modernen Mutter"* (The Uneasiness of the Modern Mother) garnered her a nomination for the *Deutsche Reporter:innenpreis*. Her eponymous book was published by Rowohlt Polaris in 2021 and became a *Spiegel* bestseller.

Her new book *Wie viel. Was wir mit Geld machen und was Geld mit uns macht* (How much. What we do with money and what money does to us), from which this piece is excerpted, will be published by Rowohlt on Oct. 18, 2022.

Hens in the rooster house

After initially ruffling some feathers, the idea of a feminist foreign policy is gaining traction in Germany | By Johannes Leithäuser

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, unlike European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, favors dresses over pantsuits when fulfilling her official duties. Is this intended to signify Baerbock's commitment to a "feminist foreign policy"? Whatever the case may be, the foreign minister is deliberate in her choice of imagery as a means of achieving political goals. The group photo for the annual ambassadors' conference at the German Foreign Office, taken recently on the steps of her official place of work, shows Baerbock in the front row surrounded by the female professional diplomats who represent Germany in various countries around the world. These women dominate the front row of the image, even though they only comprise roughly a quarter of Germany's ambassadorships. The male ambassadors of the group stand in the rows behind the women.

Rarely omitted from the minister's speeches, the term "feminist foreign policy" is nonetheless plagued by one bias and one ambiguity. The implicit bias of the term is that, if intended and understood as a battle cry against a certain kind of ruling (white) patriarchal imperialism, women are better at making and keeping peace.

At the same time, the term bears an ambiguity that is rooted in more positive aims. These aims, already championed by the Swedish Foreign Ministry for nearly a decade and recently taken up by the United Nations, target the equality of women as agents of foreign policy and as individuals affected by foreign policy and development aid. In other words, the goal here is equality for women in all societies globally. This is the view of feminist foreign policy as it is now also formulated at the Foreign Office. Last spring, at the launch of the Office's first "Summit for Feminist Foreign Policy," Baerbock stated her intent to "follow the Swedish example" and place the "focus on the three 'R's, rights, representation and resources." She argued, however, that a "superseding D" – for diversity – should be added to this triad. The minister explained that she wanted her policy to "not only advance women," but also to achieve "equal rights, equal representation and adequate resources for all people who are marginalized."

Speaking to the German ambassadors gathered in early September in Berlin, Baerbock once again extended the circle of those she felt should be included, which now meant as many as possible of those people willing and able to sit around a negotiating table and find political solutions. The core of feminist foreign policy, she noted, is "that we learn and benefit from engaging with the perspectives of others."

While the first two months of her everyday political life as Germany's first female foreign minister were dominated by the consequences of Vladimir Putin's war of aggression in Ukraine, Baerbock nevertheless placed her most noticeable deliberate emphasis on the feminist question. Putin's war also gave her the opportunity to counteract the prejudice of men worshipping gun barrels as phallic symbols by herself advocating the delivery of heavy weapons to Ukraine more quickly, vehemently and explicitly than Chancellor Olaf Scholz. And with regard to the feminist issue, she was given ample opportunity by several men, particularly those seeking to ridicule any kind of emancipated battle cry, to demonstrate her political acumen. One of these men was opposition leader Friedrich Merz, who demanded in the Bundestag that the €100-billion Bundeswehr program be used exclusively for new weapons and equipment, but under no circumstances for such things as "a feminist foreign policy." He suggested the minister could do that "elsewhere."

The coalition agreement published in Berlin last December by the traffic light coalition contains the term "feminist foreign policy" in its original English, simply because the Green party's proposal to anchor this term in the government program met with more head-shaking than approval from its coalition partners. This was also due to the fact that the Green party negotiators hadn't been able to link their insistence on this buzzword with a catchy concept, so they settled on the English formulation, also because it sounded vaguer than its German equivalent.

These days, the German foreign minister does indeed pursue a feminist foreign policy "elsewhere," and she does so whenever the opportunity arises. On her trips abroad, she intentionally visits institutions and programs where women are being supported and empowered. In February, only a few days before the Russian attack on Ukraine, she visited a women's center in Mariupol and listened to Ukrainian women activists tell her about the bitter social consequences already being created by the conflict with the Russian separatists alone. More recently, during a visit to Morocco, she flew specifically to Agadir to be on hand to watch schoolgirls take their first steps into the world of computer science with the help of Lego technical construction kits at a summer camp.

The world of high-level diplomacy is likewise becoming more female. Indeed, Baerbock has long since ceased to be alone among men. This summer, for several moments when she consulted with her G7 colleagues in that circle of the most important Western industrialized countries, there were more women (from Canada, France and Great Britain) than men taking part in the round. At larger conferences, such as the G20 format involving the most important industrialized and emerging countries, women represent a large minority: in addition to the countries mentioned above, the host country of Indonesia, South Africa and Australia were also represented by female ministers at the latest summit.

The most progress in implementing equal opportunities for women has occurred in Baerbock's own ministry. If one was to take a staff photo that showed the minister's inner circle of colleagues rather than the German ambassadors, one would see more women than men. In addition to the minister herself at the top, this includes two female ministers of state, one male minister of state as well as women as four of ten department heads.

PICTURE ALLIANCE/DPA | BRITTA PEDERSEN

Being upfront about it: Annalena Baerbock and her new leading diplomats in Berlin in September

Johannes Leithäuser covers German foreign policy for the daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

City of freedom

Ana-Maria Trăsnea, the State of Berlin's Delegate to the Federation and Permanent Secretary for Active Citizenship, Democracy Support and International Relations, spoke to *The Berlin Times* about the allure and challenges Berlin faces

The phrase "Berlin is poor, but sexy" is known far beyond the borders of Berlin and Germany. Does it still apply? And what has changed?

Klaus Wowereit coined this phrase almost 20 years ago in a different situation. Back then, we were faced with a structural debt burden. Today we are grappling with severe crises. This is the third year of the pandemic. The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine is ongoing. Berlin is much better positioned today than it was back then. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, we were seeing economic growth that was well above average, we had reduced our deficit and unemployment rates had gone down. Today, Berlin offers prospects for the future.

Berlin would like to be in league with London, Paris and New York – or rather is in that league. What does the city have that other world capitals do not?

We are the "city of freedom." Traces of our history can be found across the city. The fall of the Berlin Wall is just one example of our unique history. Our cultural metropolis boasts treasures in museums, exhibitions, concert venues and much more. Berlin is a trendsetter when it comes to new music and clubs. We have more tourists than Paris, and almost as many as London. By international standards, Berlin is still relatively affordable. This draws young people in particular. All in all, Berlin is a very young city, and that's why our universities are so attractive. They are the basis of our often world-leading research and science landscape.

Six months of war in Ukraine and six months of thousands of refugees living in Berlin. What has Berlin done well and what must and can improve?

Many Berliners got involved right at the beginning and they're still helping out. Countless charitable organizations have worked with the state of Berlin to ensure that people who arrive here receive help quickly. I would like to take this opportunity to say "thank you" to them all. The Berlin Senate set up a comprehensive crisis management scheme to help coordinate the different efforts. We took care of arrivals, accommodation and the provision of basic services, and we are still doing so today. Berlin has become a hub for refugees, but we must keep working to create an equitable redistribution system. Once again, we have shown that Berlin is a city that can master crises.

Our democracy is undergoing an enormous stress test as a result of attacks by the radical right, conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers, fake news and internet trolls. What can a city like Berlin do to face these threats?

Clear communication, unambiguous language, prompt reactions, explaining policy- and decision-making – that's our mandate. In these areas, the Senate stands firmly with civil society and everyone committed to defending our democracy. The fight against right-twing extremism and conspiracy theories must be fought on all levels. We are ready to support all those who stand up for democracy and social cohesion. As advocates of democracy, we need to show our colors in our borough assemblies and the state parliament, as well.

FIONN GROSSE

Ana-Maria Trăsnea

At the recent U20 summit in Jakarta, in your capacity as state secretary for international relations, you met with representatives from the other 19 international cities whose countries belong to the G20. Is the foreign policy of Berlin different from that of Germany? And is the same true for Paris and France?

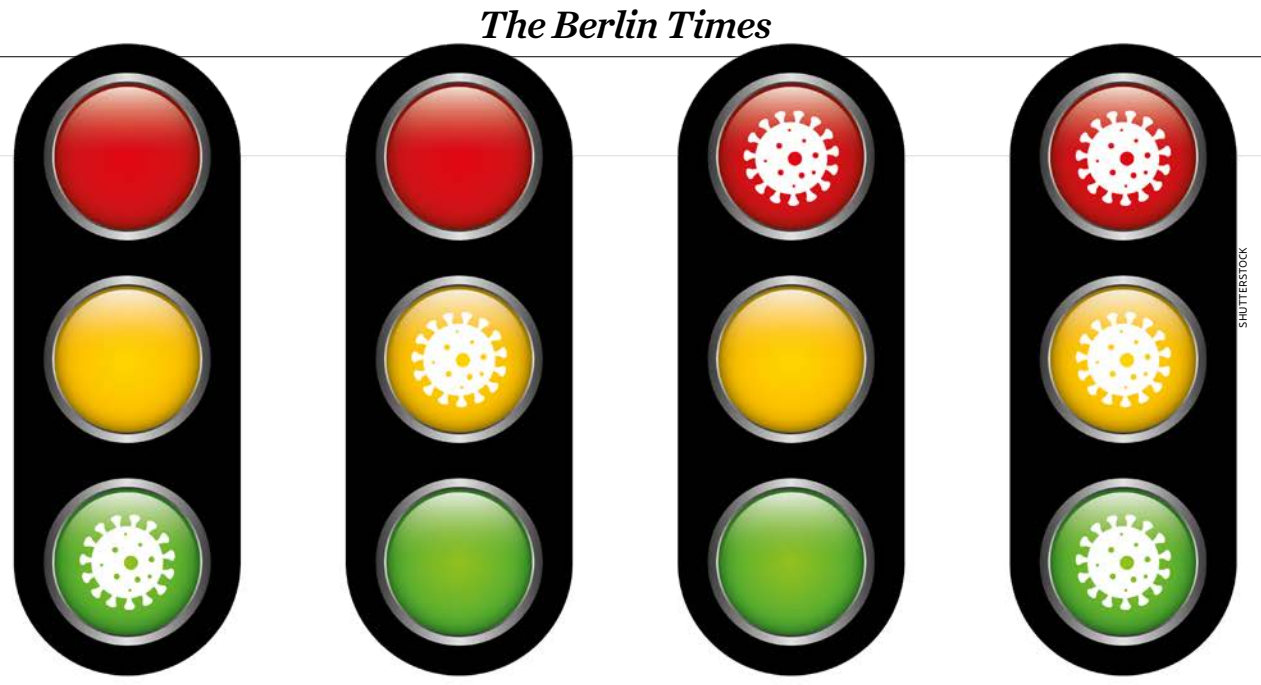
What stands out is that urban foreign policy is still not a matter of course. At present, cities like Berlin and Paris have to make clear that they are key players in the fight against global problems like climate change and social injustice and that this is why we need international mechanisms of cooperation that include all levels of decision-making. This is a concern that large cities share across national borders. At the end of August, I met colleagues from around the world at the annual summit of the U20 alliance in Jakarta. We presented the G20 with a communiqué featuring the cities' key proposals. Our work in networks like the U20 shows that cities can enrich traditional foreign policy with fresh perspectives and instruments.

The Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, rising inequality – can cities like Berlin create policy to address these issues better than the federal government can?

Urban diplomacy is fundamental to solving global crises. Waste disposal ensures that our cities are clean. But if Los Angeles, for instance, does not sustainably manage the waste they produce, this will have an impact on the cities of the global south, on the shores of which this waste will end up. People who don't find decent jobs and future prospects in the city where they live will become refugees. On the other hand, cities can offer concrete solutions to problems. For instance, the upgrading of slums in Jakarta reflects the basic idea of Berlin's social housing policy. At the same time, Jakarta's "super-app" JAKI, which helps to digitalize public services in a creative, cross-sectoral and barrier-free manner, is inspiring cities from London to Bangkok. Berlin, on the other hand, has made a tangible contribution to the fight against pandemics with the world's first PCR test. And there are many more examples.

You have been in office for just under a year. What has left you surprised, delighted, hopeful or skeptical about the state of affairs in Berlin?

The city is experiencing a new beginning under Mayor Franziska Giffey. For instance, we are making headway with one of our top priorities, namely creating new affordable housing. In my experience, Berlin's administration and the people who work for it are much better than their image. Again and again, I have been surprised by Berliners' heartfelt commitment to our city and its urban community.



SHUTTERSTOCK

A winter's tale

Will Germany's three-party governing coalition be derailed by world events? | By Ursula Münch

All Western countries – Ukraine, in particular – are currently grappling with multiple crises at once, each offering up problems and challenges not wished on one's worst enemy. And even though Germany is doing better economically than its peer countries worldwide, public appreciation for the German government by no means reflects this state of affairs. In early August, as many as 63 percent of respondents in a widely respected German survey expressed their displeasure with the federal government, saying they were either less satisfied or not at all satisfied with the work being done in Berlin. In contrast to the first few months of the so-called traffic light coalition (comprising the SPD, Greens and FDP), this criticism is no longer limited to the two figures of Chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD), whom many consider to be too timid and uncommunicative, and Christine Lambrecht (SPD), his seemingly clueless minister of defense.

Indeed, a new set of cabinet members has started to feel the pressure, primarily Health Minister Karl Lauterbach (SPD) and Finance Minister Christian Lindner (FDP). Even Economics and Climate Minister Robert Habeck (Greens), a perennial favorite in the polls, has come under heavy criticism for his ministry's sloppy handling of the *Gasumlage*, a gas levy designed to help energy companies manage their additional costs. In its original form, the levy would have provided relief to companies that need anything but financial support from their cost-burdened customer base. The fact that Habeck defended himself by stating in an interview that no one could have known "how intertwined this gas market is" only added a dash of malicious glee – even from the ranks of his own coalition partners – to the otherwise infrequent media phenomenon of "Habeck bashing."

In other words, the traffic light coalition is paying the price for what, in light of the September 2021 election results, seemed inevitable: the ideological and policy overlap among the three partners in government, particularly with regard to issues such as the pandemic, Russia, climate protection and taxes, is only as broad as are the interests of their respective constituents. In December 2021, when the three coalition partners brought their difficult negotiations to a close, promising the public and each other that they would "dare more progress," they likely still hoped their biggest task would be limited "only" to the climate catastrophe. Of course, then came the Russian leadership's war of aggression against Ukraine and the dispute over the supply of "heavy weapons." But there were even more to come. Germany is plagued by two things, in particular: a much greater dependence on Russian gas than the rest of the EU and an energy-policy promise made prematurely by the previous government, namely to shift from fossil fuel and nuclear energy sources to a fully renewable energy supply. This shift was announced by the second Merkel cabinet (CDU/CSU with FDP, 2009–2013) after the nuclear disaster in Fukushima in the spring of 2011 and subsequently managed disastrously by the federal and state governments. Many of the key measures designed to implement the energy transition also failed due to the populist-friendly course of the Bavarian component of the Union during its 16 years in power, namely the CSU. The leadership of that party regularly chose to play to the sensitivities of their voters rather than push through the unpopular necessities associated with climate change and energy security.

There are also several other inherited liabilities that continue to complicate the business of governing in Germany. For example, the distrust, especially among East Germans, of politicians in general and particular individuals in power is unmistakable at events on German public squares, even more than 30 years after German unification. Among other reasons, this has to do with the ongoing lower-grade economic situation in eastern Germany, including higher rates of unemployment, a surplus of males and the older average-age of the population in the five states of the former GDR, which currently still account for roughly one-fifth of the total German population. This dissatisfaction in eastern Germany with the various federal governments has risen especially since the start of the third post-Wall decade – and in particular in reaction to the federal government's refugee policy of 2015 and 2016, by which residents in those areas felt completely overrun. Because the former GDR failed to integrate the "contract workers" it brought in from Algeria, Cuba, Mozambique, Vietnam and Angola, choosing to "barrack" them instead, it denied its citizens any kind of positive experience with migration. Even eastern Germans who consider themselves to be political moderates complain about the failure of the state, politics and the notorious "mainstream media" when it comes to the refugee issue. At the same time, Russian state propaganda falls on especially fertile ground here; the traditional anti-American and pro-Russian attitudes found in large parts of the population in the former GDR appear to be becoming more ingrained rather than fading away over generations. Individual protests against Covid-19 restrictions also took on a more radical hue in most of the eastern German states than in the rest of the country. This is due in no small part to the strategies pursued by the right-wing "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD), which is particularly strong in the five eastern state parliaments. The party deliberately peppers its national-conservative "anti-establishment" stance with high-profile, right-wing extremist slogans, and when called out, they inevitably insist these words were "not meant that way."

In almost all of these and other crises, the federal government under Chancellor Olaf Scholz is simply not looking good. The chancellor, but also the SPD leadership, regularly find themselves in situations where they're forced to endorse positions that are wholeheartedly rejected by their own base, such as those put forward by Finance Minister Christian Lindner (FDP) on tax policy. Diverging views on such policies as arms deliveries to Ukraine (Greens and FDP versus SPD), extending the life of the three German nuclear power plants that still produce electricity (SPD and FDP versus Greens) and the most effective tax policy to battle staggering inflation (SPD and Greens versus FDP) have led some observers to predict an earlier-than-expected end to the traffic light coalition.

Still, there is little to suggest that the Greens and FDP would cooperate better under the leadership of the Union (CDU/CSU), which held the chancellery for 16 years under Angela Merkel. Of course, a so-called Jamaica coalition made up of CDU/CSU, Greens and FDP could be forged during the current legislative period. However, the hurdles that would have to be overcome to usher in a change of chancellor are high, not only in terms of constitutional law. For example, it would be almost impossible to sell such a move – whereby the two smaller coalition partners, currently at odds with each other, would switch out their coalition partner and thus the chancellor – to an already disenchanted public during the biggest crisis of the post-war era. And who in these parliamentary groups would actually want to see Friedrich Merz – the new CDU chairman and a man whom many believe represents a bygone era – as chancellor? Similarly, anyone pushing for new elections that might produce a parliamentary majority for a Green chancellor is probably going to have to wait a few more years, given the Greens' mixed-message experience with high poll numbers and low election results. In fact, instead of opting for progressive politics, voters eventually went for less demanding choices. And aside from that, the FDP is sure to avoid playing with fire at the moment, in particular in the form of the five-percent hurdle. This law states that a party with less than five percent of the vote loses all seats in the Bundestag; it happened to the party in 2017 and resulted in an existential anxiety that is still felt to this day.

At this point, it is worth noting that Olaf Scholz owes his chancellorship less to his own charisma and the attractiveness of his party than to the mistakes of the other two candidates for chancellor, Armin Laschet (CDU) and Annalena Baerbock (Greens), and to the sheer professionalism of his own campaign team. Confronted with widespread dissatisfaction with the federal government, the chancellor is now feeling the effects of the fact that, in the election held only one year ago, active support for him and his party was just over a quarter of the electorate – with a voter turnout of 76.5 percent. In the course of the campaign, he was able to capitalize on the dilettantism of his fellow candidates, but the business of government, especially in a period of "permacrisis," functions in a different way: the focus of public attention is now on the chancellor's leadership qualities, his political priorities, his management of a heterogeneous coalition and his communication style. Unlike during an election campaign, the blunders made by third parties no longer cast a milder light on his own actions; instead, when these actions are carried out by coalition partners, they are also attributed to him as chancellor. This makes for a lot of nervousness – both in the chancellor's office and in the headquarters of the three coalition parties.

The concern that towers over all current conflicts the federal government is being asked to manage is the fear that even Germany's efficient welfare state could become overwhelmed by attempting to deliver on the current chancellor's promise of "you'll never walk alone." On the other hand, it remains highly unlikely that further rises in the cost of living and a possible gas shortage will actually lead to social unrest in Germany. We can safely ignore those warnings made, for example, by the AfD and Die Linke, supposedly out of a concern for the future; those parties are merely pursuing their own interests and trying to profit from the fears stoked in the process. Nevertheless, the issue has been taken up by the media. And, indeed, we have already witnessed the digitally enhanced mobilization power of a small group of people who misconstrue the guarantees of liberal democracy, and of those extremists who – in Germany, too – dream of a coup.

Russia continues to spread its lies, and the AfD, in particular, has been known to take them up and extend them for its own purposes. Two examples of such propaganda are that the "only thing" the Ukrainian leadership has to do is give up parts of its state territory and strive for a negotiated solution and that the German policy towards Russia should return to its previous emphasis on maintaining good German-Russian relations. They argue that if these two things were put into practice – at least according to a naïve interpretation of the world that ignores the imperialist goals of Putin and his followers – then Germans would be able to return to their beloved ease and comfort once more. We should not believe the fairy tale of impending social unrest in Germany. Nevertheless, there could be a very cold winter to come.

Ursula Münch is director of the *Akademie für Politische Bildung*, an academy for civic education in Tutzing on Lake Starnberg in Bavaria. She is also executive editor of the weekly *Der Hauptstadtbrief*.

SHUTTERSTOCK/SEISAI.H

Accidental revolutionaries

Chancellor Olaf Scholz and his traffic light coalition set out to "dare more progress" in domestic policy, only to have Vladimir Putin force them to fundamentally transform German foreign and security policy instead

By Henning Hoff

When German Chancellor-to-be Olaf Scholz inked the "coalition treaty" he had negotiated between his Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens and the business-friendly Free Democrats (FDP) in November 2021, foreign and security policy was not all that high on the agenda.

His so-called traffic light coalition, untested on the national level, had taken a page from former SPD Chancellor Willy Brandt's book, whose reform-oriented coalition with the FDP, which took over the reins of government in 1969, had promised to "dare more democracy." Half a century later, Scholz and his incoming government announced to "dare more progress" to change the country once again for the better – by setting in motion "the biggest industrial modernization of Germany in more than 100 years" (Scholz), making it "a pioneer in climate protection," helping the less-well off, addressing Germany's housing crisis, legalizing cannabis for adults, purging the German constitution of the concept of "race" and much more besides.

By the time Scholz was sworn in on Dec. 6, however, the international outlook had already considerably darkened. Among its allies and soon publicly, the US government warned that Russian President Vladimir Putin had made up his mind to invade Ukraine. But what shocked Scholz and his incoming ministers even more was how understocked Germany's gas storage facilities had been allowed to become – predominantly at the hands of Russian-controlled firms like Gazprom Germania, upon which previous governments led by Angela Merkel (with the SPD as a mainly "pro-Russian" junior partner) had become dependent, despite numerous warnings.

Scholz, Green Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck and their closest advisors acted fast. They started a secret crash program to buy as much gas capacity as was available on world markets and took urgent steps to make sure Germany would be in a position to take Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) on shore, via one or two "floating" LNG terminals to be located at Germany's North Sea shore. When Scholz visited Putin in Moscow in early February 2022, his government's warning that aggression against Ukraine would jeopardize Russia's decade-long energy partnership with Germany, which had begun during the Cold War, was no empty threat.

But fundamentally rethinking Germany's energy security, which the Greens had been pushing for years, was only the prelude. When Putin sent his tanks and paratroopers across the border to decapitate the government in Kyiv and "denazify" Ukraine (read: destroy its independence and erase its nationhood), Scholz called a special session of the Bundestag. In a major speech on Feb. 27, three days after the start of Russia's brutal war of aggression, Scholz gave Germany's changes to its foreign and security policy a catchword: *Zeitenwende* – a turning point in history, the dawning of a new era. It will likely prove nothing short of a big bang in German foreign and security affairs, while Germany's coalition politicians have become almost accidental revolutionaries.

In the coalition agreement, some change had been envisaged. NATO's two-percent goal had been something the left wings of both the SPD and the Greens had longstanding objections to, along with the equipping the Bundeswehr with armed drones. The agreement indicated that both might be on the way in terms of a three percent-goal when adding up the budgets for the Bundeswehr, the German Foreign Office and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation. Yet those sounded like far-away goals to be achieved at some point in the future, certainly beyond the four-year scope of the agreement.

With the *Zeitenwende* speech, Scholz, without giving his rank-and-file MPs much forewarning, created a number of faits accomplis. One was the subsequent announcement of the purchasing of US F-35 fighters as successors to Germany's aging Tornado fleet in order to ensure Germany's continued participation in NATO's nuclear sharing (the Greens, including Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, and a good part of the SPD abhorred this idea of a German finger, however distant, on the nuclear trigger, although Berlin's co-determination of NATO deterrence policy would require it).

A debt-financed special fund worth €100 billion gives the Bundeswehr the financial muscle to acquire what it has been lacking after two decades of underspending. The situation had been so serious that this does not, strictly speaking, constitute German rearmament; rather, it means creating armed forces that are actually fit for purpose. To have steal from other parts of the army, navy or air force to be able to arrive fully equipped as a potential fighting force. (Reportedly, a fifth of €100 billion alone will be needed to meet the level of NATO munition storage standards.)

Germany will now gain this military dimension in its foreign affairs that it has hitherto been lacking. That alone will have profound consequences – probably not so much for the way Germany conducts itself in international affairs, but more in the sense of what it will enable NATO, and the EU, to accomplish. The "new reality" for Germany and the EU is being confronted by a Russia that is as aggressive as it is revanchist. For the foreseeable future, European security must necessarily first and foremost on Russia.

> DURING THE MERKEL ERA, THE CHRONICALLY UNDERFUNDED BUNDESWEHR HAD MORPHED INTO AN ORGANIZATION THAT BECAME CLOSE TO OBSOLETE AS WELL AS IRREFORMABLE.

"planes that fly, ships that can be put to sea, soldiers that are equipped fully for their dangerous missions" was the aim Scholz had announced recently at the Munich Security Conference in early February, adding that this should be "something a country the size of Germany, that carries a special responsibility for Europe, should be able to afford."

In truth, Germany's outlay of around €50 billion a year had financed armed forces that could accomplish very little. During the Merkel era, the chronically underfunded Bundeswehr had morphed into an organization that became close to obsolete as well as irreformable. When units deployed to missions or to larger NATO exercises, they had to beg, borrow and

This makes it inevitable that Germany redefines its role as that of a key European security provider. A fully equipped Bundeswehr financed by "at least" (Scholz on Feb. 27) two percent of GDP would make it possible for Germany to build the backbone of NATO's conventional defense and deterrence postures. This is urgently needed, also considering that the US likely will not – and frankly can no longer be expected to – do all the heavy lifting required in Europe, as it has done once again in support of Ukraine. Without Washington – and to some degree London – Kyiv would be in Russian hands today.

It would also work to enhance Berlin's standing in Central, Eastern and Northern Europe, where its sometimes-hesitant assistance for Ukraine, particularly during the early days of the war, has left deep suspicions that Poland, the Baltic States, Finland or Sweden could not rely on Germany if it came to Russia invading their countries. The Scholz government has its work cut out for it in terms of rectifying these unsettling perceptions. Meanwhile, Poland, which has opted to turn to South Korean rather than German armament companies to beef up its military with a €6 billion order for tanks and howitzers, is emerging as a plausible rival in terms of European military leadership.

Germany's *Zeitenwende* will also work toward increasing "European sovereignty," a key tenet of French President Emmanuel Macron's foreign policy since 2017; Scholz, already as Merkel's vice chancellor and finance minister, has wholeheartedly subscribed to attaining this goal and so has his traffic light government. As Scholz made clear in his speech on European policy at Prague's Charles University on Aug. 29, Berlin is indeed ready to provide the nucleus of the EU's 5,000-strong Rapid Reaction Force, as formulated in March. It is intended to become operational in 2025 and should, inter alia, be able to perform evacuation missions, which, after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, only the US military has been capable of. This will require a command center, eventually its own headquarters, which needs money, staffing and technical infrastructure. "We will discharge our responsibility," Scholz promised in Prague.

There are sure to be obstacles on the way. One key question is how quickly a country that used to feel so comfortable seeing itself as a "force of peace" – one of the SPD's favorite slogans – can pivot to making all the tough decisions this necessarily entails. Already in the coming winter, critics will begin citing Germany's likely unfavorable economic situation (scarce energy, high inflation) as an argument against an increase in spending for security, even though the federal budget will only really be affected once the "special budget" has been spent in four to five years.

It will be left to Scholz and his coalition, but also the opposition Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), to make the case for a Germany that, at last, acts as a military power. This is indeed well within reach, as polls have shown since the start of Russia's war of aggression. There have been solid majorities for greater military spending as well as robustly assisting Ukraine, even if it causes economic hardship. If the country misses this historical chance, it is easy to foresee a future in which the EU and possibly even NATO disintegrate. In such a deeply geopolitical world of great power competition, a permanently militarily incapacitated Germany would simply be unable to defend itself, let alone Europe.

Henning Hoff is executive editor of *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, published by the German Council on Foreign Relations.

Capital city briefings

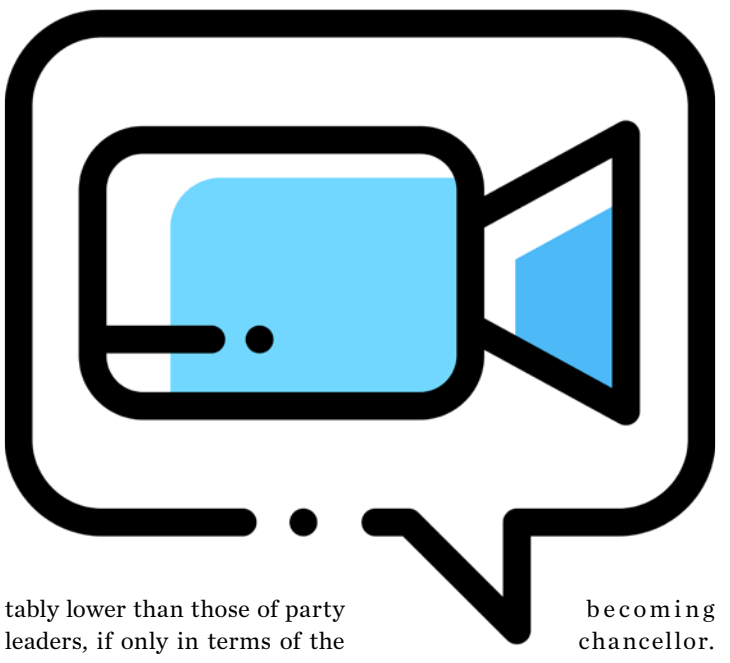
Covid-19 lockdowns have left their mark on the German political scene | By Günter Bannas

Communication is the lifeblood of democratic political systems – and especially of Germany's particular form of parliamentary-based government. This communication hinges to a great extent on in-person encounters, which can only happen when the individuals involved have opportunities to gather in the same physical space, and these opportunities rely on easy accessibility to specific locations where such encounters take place.

In early 2020, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was precisely this co-dependent structure that threw a hitherto unprecedented wrench into the typical functioning of Germany's political parties and their major players. In Berlin, the federal states and indeed all major cities, the venues and locales where politicians would otherwise have met for formal and informal gatherings were forced to shut their doors. Party congresses were either cancelled or took place in hybrid forms, meaning that delegates, invitees and sometimes as many as one-thousand journalists were forced to link up from their homes or offices to a TV-studio conference organized by the party leadership. (It is worth mentioning here that these events turned out to be just as expensive as "normal" in-person party congresses, which are usually held on tradeshow grounds and include travel costs and hotel accommodations.) Smaller meetings and conferences organized by party committees with members of the Bundestag and state politicians took place entirely by way of video conferencing.

In other words, the opportunities for politicians to meet in person – and thus to engage in both formal and informal communication – were either severely limited or simply not possible. This state of affairs has now been overcome, if not entirely, then to a large extent. Still, the Covid-19 era has nevertheless left a lasting mark on the day-to-day operations of politics – both at the seat of government in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany.

It might be interesting to carry out a political analysis of the extent to which the Covid-19 restrictions have exerted a long-term impact on the way political parties operate. For example, Covid-era video conferences and hybrid party congresses no doubt boosted the standing of those party members who were already in leadership positions – almost always at the expense of rank-and-file members and delegates. After all, it was the people at party headquarters who determined who among the members sitting at home on their laptops would speak when and for how long. And it was simply impossible for less senior members to engage in any of the activities they might otherwise have pursued at in-person party congresses, such as heckling and different forms of organized protest. Moreover, the quality of the contributions from rank-and-file conference participants was almost inevitably lower than those of party leaders, if only in terms of the often-shaky video screens and poor sound quality. Who can forget the image of Jürgen Trittin – a former federal minister, no less – furiously slamming his fist down on his laptop in his home office after realizing he wouldn't be able to make one of his usual verbal interjections.



One of the results of this transformation is that the political opinion-making process in Germany's political party system has become more centralized. And this centralization goes beyond the usual level on display when federal elections, coalition negotiations and government-building talks are on the agenda, as was the case in the fall of 2021. With regard to the center-left SPD, their chancellor candidate Olaf Scholz was able to spite the party leadership and Bundestag parliamentary group and managed to hold onto the reins of power even more easily and firmly than on previous occasions, ultimately becoming chancellor. Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck, the two Green Party co-heads who would later become federal ministers, were able to push through their compromise-driven agenda without the squabbles and upheavals that usually plague their party. The market-friendly FDP consisted solely of party leader Christian Lindner – at least in the eyes of the public and in terms of the actual internal balance of power – and he went on to become Germany's finance minister. In contrast, the center-right CDU of Angela Merkel was hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic; the health-policy restrictions in place at the time meant that the party simply didn't have enough time to solve the leadership problems resulting from the resignation of party chair Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who'd once been hand-picked to be Merkel's successor.

It's also going to take some time before the customs and circumstances that shape relations between politics and the media shift back to the way they were before Covid-19. These norms originated decades prior, in the former capital of Bonn, and were adapted to modern times when the government moved to Berlin.

Politics and media also met at the Federal Press Ball and in so-called circles set up by journalists. These were upscale and highly respected gatherings, some of which were organized along political lines, but they were also where young, up-and-coming capital-city correspondents gathered at the beginning of their careers. Depending on how exclusive they were, these circles sometimes welcomed key politicians, chancellors and ministers – and also those parliamentarians for whom the ill-appeasing term "backbenchers" was forged.

Most of this, along with everything else, was shipped off to Berlin when the capital moved from Bonn. There were some differences, of course, as it was the dawn of a new era, but also because Berlin is indeed much bigger than Bonn. As a result of the tougher media competition, the number of indiscretions also increased, which is why there was a marked increase in the tendency of politicians to isolate themselves. As a result, the number of meeting places in pubs and restaurants multiplied. Today, however, there are no longer any chance encounters. Locales such as Café Einstein, Borchardt and the Rhenish pub StäV (short for Ständige Vertretung, West Germany's old embassy or "permanent representation" in East Berlin), are no longer the measure of all things on Berlin's political scene, although they've now become very popular among tourists.

Still, anyone wishing to be seen having a conversation goes there. Those who do not wish to be seen stay far away from these Berlin-Mitte locations. Either way, the tendency to want to see and be seen is always a tricky thing. Who meets whom and gets tagged in the process – this can become a political issue for anyone involved. And that applies to all encounters, except for those large parties put on by federal state representative offices and attended by up to a thousand guests, as well as to receptions at the offices of media companies. Anyone can – and should – be able to talk to anyone they choose. Other rules apply, like how many prominent guests should be present and whether the chancellor or any members of the cabinet are on hand.

Either way, there has been a noticeable shift in the lines and modes of political communication stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet to be determined is whether these changes are permanent and to what extent they will have a lasting impact on the political goings-on in Berlin and Germany as a whole.

Günter Bannas was the longtime Berlin bureau chief of the daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. He is currently a columnist for *Der Hauptstadtbrief*.

PICTURE ALLIANCE/DPA | CHRISTOPH SOEDER

Ready for its close-up: Viktoria Berlin's squad for the 2022/23 season

A league of their own

Women's soccer is doing it for themselves | By Inge Kloepfer

Nobody had ever seen anything like it before. On an afternoon in late August, roughly 1,000 spectators had gathered in the stands to watch the season-opening match between two teams in Berlin's third-division women's soccer league, roughly the equivalent to a single-A minor league game in baseball. While the large crowd of fans in the stadium was in and of itself unusual, even more extraordinary was the number of German celebrities among the spectators, including *Tatort* star Ulrike Volkerts and partner, ZDF presenter Dunja Hayali, with an entire group of like-minded female fans, two-time World Cup champion Ariane Hingst and several other leading women managers from the German startup and advertising worlds.

Why all this sudden attention for third-division women's soccer in Berlin? The answer to that question requires a bit of background information: the two women's teams battling it out that day were the squads from 1. FC Union and Viktoria Berlin, and even though their match was "only" a city derby in the regional league, it embodied the recently discovered potential of women's soccer – a potential that promises to develop even further in the next few years. Both Berlin clubs have big plans for their women's teams – and have long since made these plans public. They're both eager to invest heavily in women's soccer, and not just since the euphoria surrounding the Women's European Championship in England this summer, where the German team made it all the way to the final. Their shared goal is to make it into the Bundesliga within a few years. The men's team at Union have been playing in the first-division league for the past four years, and the club now intends to get its female squad similarly up to scratch.

Viktoria 1889 Berlin, a team that has long been quite successful in the women's game at the regional level, is also looking to make a rapid advance. But they're taking a different approach – one that involves a business model unique in Germany. A group of six women led by Ariane Hingst have taken over Viktoria's women's team and are now running it as their own GmbH, a limited liability company. The goal for their 22 players is to reach the Bundesliga, and when they announced this "move," these women entrepreneurs sparked a media storm. In other words, it was clear that interest in the season-opening derby between these two Berlin regional league teams would be huge on a number of different fronts.

"I want this to be the future of women's soccer," says Verena Pausder, when asked about the idea of a women's soccer company run *by* women *for* women. Such a team would be economically autonomous and not have to deal with the difficulties associated with depending on the goodwill of men's clubs in the Bundesliga that happen to be able to afford a women's team. Pausder is a leading figure in the women's startup scene, and among the six women investors, she likely has the most experience in getting new companies off the ground.

As awareness increases, it sooner or later leads to a corresponding increase in the number of games with professional coverage, and these, in turn, can be marketed to a greater and more effective degree. It's only understandable, then, that the women entrepreneurs at Viktoria Berlin are eager to be a part of this development.

The idea of a soccer club operated by women for women was inspired in part by Angel City FC, a Los Angeles women's soccer team founded in 2020 by a group of prominent women and celebrities, including Natalie Portman, Serena Williams, Jennifer Garner and Eva Longoria. The team plays in the top league in the US and most recently got a boost with this season's hiring of Almuth Schult, Germany's national goalkeeper.

There's simply never been anything like it in Germany – a club run by women for women at the level of professional soccer. The team of original founders is also unlike anything seen before, consisting as it does of leading women managers, all of whom have demonstrated their success not only in sports but also in advertising, media and the German corporate world in particular. The team includes Hingst, the former professional soccer player who won just about everything there was to win in the 2000s, and Pausder herself. Another investor is Tanja Wielgroß, until recently CEO of Vattenfall Wärme Berlin AG, a major energy company. They're joined by Felicia Mutterer, a former TV presenter and journalist, Katharina Kurz, the co-founder and managing director of BRLO Craft Beer, and marketing expert Lisa Währer, who's taken over full-time management of the company. Together, they also bring a huge network of movers and shakers with them.

And the number of interested parties continues to grow. "We now have 80 women investors who've decided to take part in the company," says Pausder. These include well-known faces, such as former swimming superstar Franziska van Almsick, successful businesswoman Lea-Sophie Cramer and Dunja Hayali, a popular news anchor at ZDF, a major German TV network. These women were given the opportunity to invest in the team with sums ranging from €10,000 and €25,000. In other words, if we assume that each of the 80 women investors contributed just the minimum amount, it would mean that the club has already added €800,000 to its coffers. This sum makes it possible to operate at a much more professional level than to date. In previous years, the team had as little as €100,000 or less at its disposal.

In other words, the initial provision of funds for Viktoria is far from shabby. The women's team at their direct rival, FC Union, reportedly has a budget of €1.5 million over the next three years. That's €500,000 per year, which is plenty to get started, but if the team advances, the budget will have to increase.

Even in women's soccer, a lot depends on money. Not only do players need to earn a salary that's large enough to get them insured at professional associations, the training that makes it possible for them to achieve a higher level of professionalism also needs to be instituted. This includes full-time coaches as well as a dedicated medical staff and a team of physiotherapists. All of this costs a lot of money, which is why the club also needs strong financial supporters. "We're going to have to find them," says Pausder, who has no doubt they'll succeed in convincing potential sponsors to make a long-term commitment.

In women's soccer, however, a lot also depends on the competition. And it's true: competition is the lifeblood of soccer, but also of business. The number of clubs offering women's competitive soccer is going to have to rise. The fact that Union is now also investing in this field bodes well for the Viktoria project. Even more promising is the fact that Union's cross-town rivals at Hertha BSC – which is still the biggest Berlin club in the Bundesliga and has consistently refused to enter the women's game to date – are coming under increasing grassroots pressure to finally get active in women's soccer. The promise of these and other potential future rivalries generates attention, which then creates more enthusiasm, anticipation and excitement.

Whether the business model of the GmbH or limited liability company succeeds in the long term – that is, whether investors will actually get something out of their investment in the long run other than the joy of supporting an increasingly successful team – is something no one is ready to predict. Nor can anyone be sure any real money will start flowing at any point in the future. That would initially have less to do with the club itself than with the standing of women's soccer, and more specifically with its acceptance and popularity in Germany. Only with rising acceptance, interest and popularity – that is to say with higher ratings and larger audience numbers – can the association charge more for TV rights, and only then will such an investment start to pay off.

In any case, this intrepid group of female founders has no intention of simply waiting around for that to happen. They've long since made considerable headway in terms of publicizing their unique idea, making it into all regional and national newspapers and onto the *Tagesschau* evening news, the most-watched nightly news show on German TV. And they have no intention of wasting this momentum: "Social media is going to play a huge role," Pausder says. And she has even more in store: "Games could also be broadcast on Twitch, for example, preferably with a proper halftime show." In other words, there are more than enough cool new ideas to explore. "We're super convinced that we've got all the ingredients we need to take a club like this to the very top."

From an investor's perspective, it makes sense to think of women's soccer as being like a startup positioning itself in an emerging market. Of course, at first, it's going to have an uncertain future and no guarantee of ever taking off. But Pausder is entirely convinced that the club has a fighting chance with its model, which continues to be unique in Germany: "The future belongs to women's soccer," she says. "What we envision and intend to achieve is by no means just a pipe dream."

WOMEN'S SOCCER IS INDEED ON THE RISE. THIS FACT WAS ON FULL DISPLAY AT THE MOST RECENT EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIPS. THE WHOLE BUSINESS IS BECOMING MORE PROFESSIONAL AND MORE MONEY IS FLOWING INTO THE SPORT NOW THAN EVER BEFORE.

Women's soccer is indeed on the rise. This fact was on full display at the most recent European Championships. The whole business is becoming more professional and more money is flowing into the sport now than ever before. Even though the sums are in no way comparable to the billion-dollar business of men's soccer, the hype surrounding the women's game is only just beginning. And the hype is justified. The women playing soccer today, even in the third division, demonstrate greater technical expertise, plus their numbers are going up, which is even more important. One might go so far as to say that women's soccer will soon show the fastest growth rates of any organized sport in Germany. Interest and enthusiasm for the women's game among fans in Germany is set to rise, too – experts are sure of it. After watching developments in other countries, such as England, France and Spain, where the business has already entered a completely new dimension, these experts predict the same for Germany.

PICTURE ALLIANCE/DPA | CARSTEN KOALL

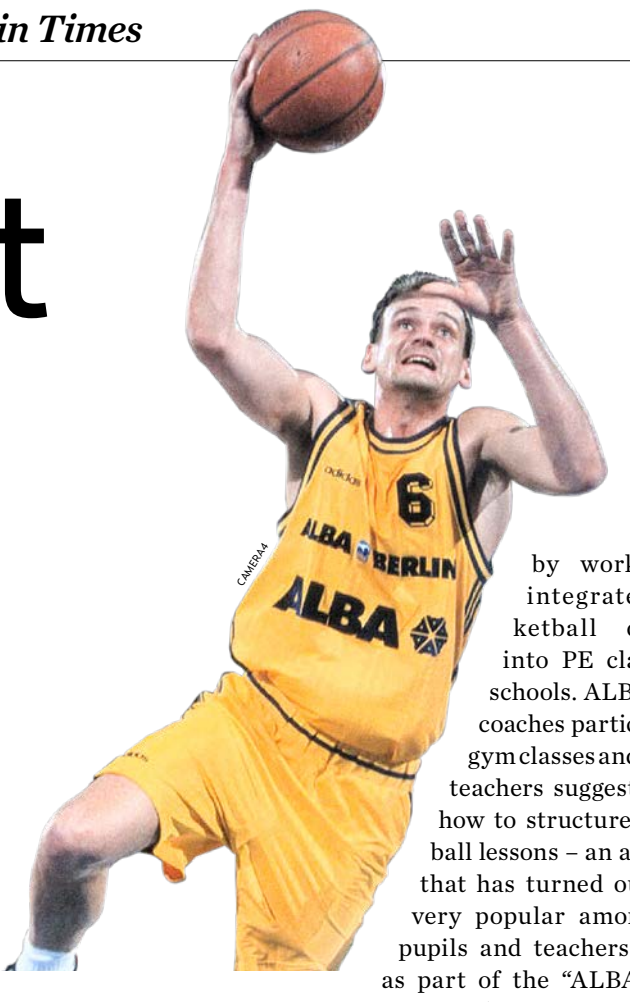
Pitch perfect: Investor and supporter Verena Pausder

Of course, the German women investors didn't start out with anything comparable in terms of glamour and celebrity. They simply didn't have the means for it. Besides, if they'd founded a completely new team, they would've had to start at the very bottom of the district league. So they bought an existing "third-class" team, one with a solid tradition and tremendous development potential. Plus, let's not forget Germany's "50+1" rule, which states that a club must own a majority of

Inge Kloepfer is a journalist and author living in Berlin.

Ball movement

A German basketball icon is taking the game to a new level, one school at a time | By Horst Schneider



The founding of the basketball club that would go on to become ALBA Berlin had nothing to do with the fall of the Wall, even though both events took place in the fateful year of 1989. However, the rapid rise of Berlin's basketballers to the top of European league was undoubtedly spurred on by the unification of Germany – and especially the merging of East and West Berlin. In 1996, ALBA moved into the newly built Max Schmeling Hall, an arena named for the legendary German boxer known for his two fights with Joe Louis in 1936 and 1938. ALBA's new digs were located in the former east, directly next to a strip of the Wall, which meant that the team was able to attract thousands of East Berlin fans to the game. This is no small feat, especially considering that East Germany's communist party (SED) had officially dismissed basketball as "not particularly deserving of support" in 1969.

The performance of the US "Dream Team" at the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona and Germany's sensational win at the 1993 FIBA European Championship also had the effect of breeding curiosity and enthusiasm for basketball – so under-appreciated in the former GDR – among sports fans in the "new" federal states. The fact that ALBA won the Europe's Korac Cup in 1995 and continued to play excellent basketball in the Europa League (basketball's version of soccer's Champions League), bringing home one German championship title after another, made it even easier for new-to-the-sport fans to fall in love with the young team.

Alongside ALBA club legends like Wendell Alexis and Henrik Rödl, there was one player, in particular, who was quick to become a fan favorite: Henning Harnisch. For eight years, the forward had been the face of the perpetual champions at Bayer Leverkusen, and in 1990 and 1991, he was named Germany's Basketball Player of the Year. When Harnisch made the move to ALBA in 1996, however, it signaled a power shift in the Bundesliga. After seven years of complete domination by Leverkusen (all of their titles were won with Harnisch at the helm), it was now ALBA Berlin's turn, and they went on to win seven championship titles in a row (1997 to 2003).

Born in Marburg to a theology professor and a schoolteacher, Harnisch was the first major German basketball superstar to hone his skills and pursue his career exclusively in Germany. In other words, he was the first to prove that a person could become a great basketball player without transferring to a US university, which was almost obligatory up to that point. Harnisch became Germany's most popular basketballer of the 1990s without ever having played in the NBA, as Detlef Schrempf had done previously and Dirk Nowitzki would do later.

While basketball experts praised Harnisch's intelligent play and team-oriented approach, younger fans were blown away by the 6-foot-8-inch athlete's ability to perform spectacular slam dunks. Players able to jump high enough to slam the ball into the 10-foot-high basket have always been the most exciting stars to watch in NBA clips. Young fans have been known to set up trampolines under baskets in an attempt to imitate their heroes. But Harnisch, who didn't need a trampoline for his slam dunks, soon became known as "Flying Henning." He appeared to defy the rules of gravity every time he took to the air and hammered the ball through the hoop.

Still, in the summer of 1998, after two more championship titles with ALBA, Harnisch surprised everyone by announcing his retirement at the age of thirty. He even turned down an offer from Virtus Bologna, the most sought-after team in European basketball at the time. Tired of the repetitive daily grind and training routines, Harnisch was eager to take on new intellectual challenges. He went on to study film and cultural studies, hosted a radio show and wrote essays and articles about basketball.

Throughout this period, Harnisch never lost touch with his former club. In 2004, immediately after completing his degree, he returned to ALBA and joined the team's management, taking up a position in the youth development program. The club had worked hard to foster up-and-coming talent since the very beginning, but now the program was faltering. "When the young people stop coming to us, we've got to start going to them," Harnisch said at the time. So he headed out – first in the area directly surrounding Max Schmeling Hall in the district of Prenzlauer Berg – to spread the word at local secondary schools.

> WHEN THE YOUNG PEOPLE STOP COMING TO US, WE'VE GOT TO START GOING TO THEM.

ALBA BERLIN

The ABC of Xs and Os: The Alba youth basketball program

Harnisch's enduring popularity was very helpful in persuading school principles to make their gyms available to so-called basketball AGs, with the AG standing for Arbeitsgruppen or "working groups" – which is a misnomer, as the groups are much more like intramural squads. Young Harnisch had made his own way to basketball in such an AG: "When I look back, I see how lucky I was that my school in Marburg had a basketball AG and that my sports teacher had good contacts to the local basketball club." This traditional path to club-based basketball has become more difficult today, he notes: "At today's all-day schools or *Ganztagsschulen*, children are in school until 4pm, so there's hardly any time left over for a basketball AG."

ALBA's youth training program aims to tackle this hurdle by working to integrate basketball directly into PE classes in schools. ALBA youth coaches participate in gym classes and give PE teachers suggestions on how to structure basketball lessons – an approach that has turned out to be very popular among both pupils and teachers. Today, as part of the "ALBA macht Schule" (ALBA does schools) program, there are over one hundred ALBA coaches (half of them full-time) active at 76 Berlin primary schools and 18 secondary schools in Berlin. At 33 sports academies, qualified ALBA youth coaches are on hand to provide support for teachers in PE classes – something that would have been unthinkable in soccer-crazy Germany as recently as 10 years ago.

ALBA coaches have now also joined with a local bank, the Mittelbrandenburgische Sparkasse (MBS), to launch a project that provides support at over 50 partnerships in the state of Brandenburg. Brothers Moritz and Franz Wagner, both of whom currently play for the Orlando Magic, were the first Berlin boys to make their way to basketball – and ultimately to the NBA – via the ALBA youth program developed by Harnisch and long since copied by other clubs in various sports. What's the secret to the success of this approach in attracting and fostering young players? Instead of focusing on theory, it was developed through hands-on training.

This practical approach also paid off during the shutdowns caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. "We basically hunkered down and came up with something very quickly," remembers Harnisch: "On the very same day that all the schools shut down, that is, when it was psychologically most important for the kids, we were there," he recalls. ALBA invited kids all across Germany to join them for stretching and exercises, all of which the ALBA coaches presented for free on YouTube. "To this day, everywhere I go, people still talk to me about it," Harnisch beams, visibly delighted about the huge success of ALBA's multiple award-winning "digital sports lessons."

As far as Harnisch is concerned, Germany has a "totally illogical" separation of school sports and club sports. Removing this disconnect is now the goal of the latest ALBA project, called "Sport Vernetzt" (sports networked), which aims to reach children in socially disadvantaged areas, such as Berlin's Gropiusstadt neighborhood. "The German sports system is unfair," Harnisch notes, "because it's set up in such a way that children from poorer neighborhoods are less likely to become athletes." On the one hand, he says, there's often a basic lack of opportunities, and on the other, the decision as to whether a child joins a sports club depends to a large extent on the parents. But for many parents, sports just aren't important. Sometimes they just aren't familiar with the sport, and sometimes they don't have any money.

In the Gropiusstadt neighborhood, ALBA has linked up daycare centers and primary schools and connected them with a sports club called "ALBA Gropiusstadt," which was founded especially for these kids. Today, with this approach as a model, clubs at almost 50 locations are working from the bottom up in cooperation with schools and daycare facilities to raise awareness and enthusiasm for sports among children of all ages. This includes clubs active in sports other than basketball, such as the soccer players at Werder Bremen and the handball team of SG Flensburg-Handewitt. The project, which was initiated by ALBA, is supported by Germany's Ministry of the Interior and the Auridis Stiftung charitable organization.

Henning Harnisch will always be a basketball player at his core. "In our hearts, of course, we'll always be a basketball club," he says. "One that hopefully does a good job at encouraging as many girls and boys as possible to play basketball at as many partner schools and traditional sports clubs as possible." He also sees an essential task in taking on social responsibility, especially in underprivileged urban areas. In other words, in the same way he popularized slam dunks in Germany as a player, he's now taking the discourse on youth sports to new heights in his function as ALBA's vice president.

Horst Schneider is a basketball writer based in Berlin.

Hey, your portal's open

Berlin's hotly debated Humboldt Forum celebrates its first year | By Birgit Rieger

IMAGO / EPD

Agora 2022: The Schlüterhof at the heart of the Humboldt Forum

The Humboldt Forum has been open to the public for one year now. The expansive new building stands on the banks of the Spree at the square known as Schlossplatz in the very heart of old Berlin. It is Europe's largest – and probably most expensive – cultural project, encapsulating over 430,000 square feet behind reconstructed historical façades on three sides and one modern façade facing the river. The Humboldt Forum is not just a museum of world cultures; it aims to be a site where art meets science. Promoting a global exchange of ideas, the Humboldt Forum fosters the enlightened spirit of the building's namesakes, the brothers Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt.

Directly opposite Museum Island, the sandstone façade of the Humboldt Forum features mighty columns and stately portals. The south side of the building is 95 feet high and 690 feet long. Although the Forum is eager to spotlight its open-mindedness and facilitate new ways of thinking in the 21st century, it looks like the retro dream of an old imperialist: new on the inside, Prussian splendor on the outside. For more than two decades, it has been the subject of hot debate.

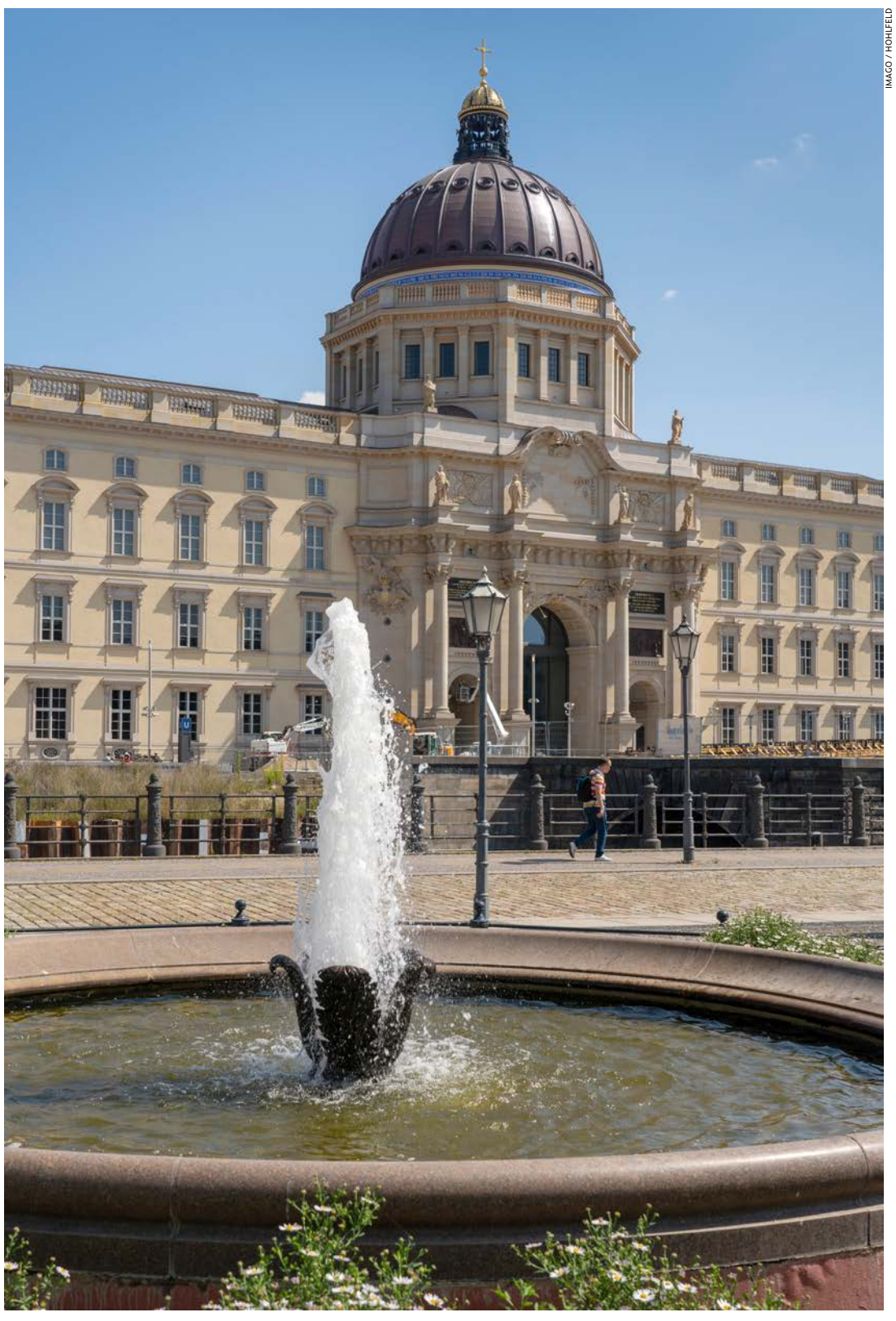
In 2002, the German Bundestag voted in favor of rebuilding Berlin's old *Stadtschloss*, or city palace. The previous structure had once housed the Electors of Brandenburg and was also the site of the birth of the German empire known as the Kaiserreich during the Wilhelminian era. That building was bombed in World War II and its remains demolished in 1950 by the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In 1976, the GDR erected its own Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic) on the same site. That "palace" was home to the GDR's parliament building and also known as a "house of the people," as it housed several restaurants, bars and cafés. In 2008, the Palast der Republik was torn down. In its place we now have today's reconstructed Prussian palace, and even though this new structure was the result of a democratic decision-making process, its very existence continues to ruffle German feathers.

In the summer of 2021, the Humboldt Forum opened its doors for the first time, inviting visitors to take part in an open-air program of events. Concerts, film screenings, performances and discussions took place in the Schlüterhof with its reconstructed sculptures. A stage was set up in the middle of the courtyard, with visitors seated around it on low platforms amid the bombastic architecture created by Italian architect Franco Stella as a hybrid of the old and the new. Guests enjoyed Berlin specialties in the new bistro and strolled through the newly created passage that takes pedestrians directly from the Lustgarten to the area known as the Spreeinsel. The exhibitions at the Humboldt Forum were open to the general public for free during the first 100 days, and some remain so to this day. In addition to Humboldt University's "Humboldt Lab," the Forum also houses a large exhibition on the German capital created by Berlin's Stadtmuseum. But the stars of the show are the Ethnological Collection and the Museum of Asian Art. These priceless collections of non-European works of art and culture belong to the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation and were previously housed in the posh neighborhood of Dahlem, deep in West Berlin. For many years, hardly anyone paid attention to the fact that the provenance of many of these cultural-historical objects from Africa, Asia, America, Australia and the South Seas had not yet been determined. This meant, of course, that there was a significant chance that looted colonial art would be among the items.

In the Humboldt Forum's simple stairwell area, which is equipped with steep escalators, an effort is underway to bring to life the history of the Schlossplatz with the help of items referred to as "traces." Among the artifacts on display here are the suitcases used by Wilhelm II when he left the palace and fled to the Netherlands after losing World War I. There are also relics from the GDR's Palast der Republik. In this sense, many things collide with one another at the Humboldt Forum: the past and the present, the struggle for power and plundered works of art. The deep push and pull between architecture and content can be felt throughout.

In September, after several opening stages, the last part of the Humboldt Forum was opened to the public: its east wing with its modern side facing the Spree. Additional highlights from the African, Oceanic and Asian collections are on display here in the roomy corridors. A particular focus is placed on the controversial Benin bronzes, which were looted by British colonialists in 1897 as part of a punitive expedition in what is now Nigeria and then sold all over the world. Berlin owns 514 Benin objects. More than 200 of them were originally supposed to be displayed at the Humboldt Forum. Shortly before the opening of the new presentation, however, the German government decided to return the Benin bronzes to Nigeria. In these matters, it's up to each museum to organize the repatriation of works itself. The Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation was the first to sign the return agreements with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Nigeria, thereby setting an example both nationally and internationally. The exhibition featuring the Benin bronzes is now much smaller than originally planned, and the story of their repatriation has become part of the exhibition, with all pieces currently on display presented as being on loan.

> IN THE HUMBOLDT FORUM'S SIMPLE STAIRWELL AREA, WHICH IS EQUIPPED WITH STEEP ESCALATORS, AN EFFORT IS UNDERWAY TO BRING TO LIFE THE HISTORY OF THE SCHLOSSPLATZ WITH THE HELP OF ITEMS REFERRED TO AS "TRACES."



IMAGO / HOHLFELD

Direct approach: View from the Schinkelplatz across the Spree towards the main portal of the Humboldt Forum

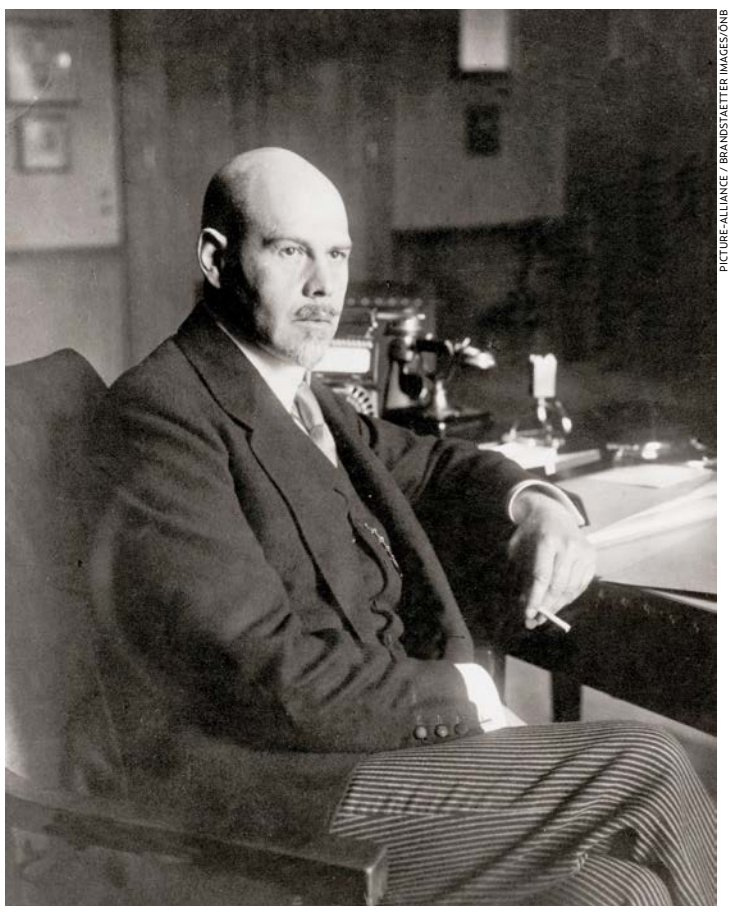
This marked an exciting moment, especially as the debates and challenges associated with presenting art with a colonial context are still in full swing today, even one year after the opening. It doesn't help, of course, that the objects are being displayed within the walls of an intimidating Hohenzollern palace. In recent years, subjects such as looted art and the process of returning artifacts to their rightful owners have increasingly become the focus of public interest. Critics argue that those responsible for the Humboldt Forum long failed to take seriously the demands to come to terms with Germany's colonial history. References to the acquisition histories behind the pieces in the collection, such as the famous "Luf-Boot," a sailboat from the South Seas, gave the impression of being tacked on at the last minute. In some cases, important aspects of a piece's history were not addressed at all in the presentations.

"So, the building is finished. What now?" President Frank-Walter Steinmeier began his speech marking the opening of the Humboldt Forum with these words in 2021. "This palace and this forum are – simply by virtue of their location, history and self-imposed mission – places of national importance. At the moment, however, this location raises more questions than it answers. These questions are also addressed to us as a nation. Are we up to this?" He went on to add: "Some find this palace unsatisfactory and worthy of criticism, if only because it raises so many questions. Some wish it had never been built in the first place." These are harsh words on what is usually a joyful occasion, especially the opening of a prestige project costing €644 million. The Humboldt Forum has shown that it's eager to confront its own contradictions and ruptures. It invites representatives of the communities where its pieces originate to curate exhibitions together; it strives to establish long-term collaborations; and it commissions contemporary artists to create sound installations on its rooftop and give performances in interior spaces. In other words, the Forum has made it clear that multiple perspectives are welcome and desired.

At this location, there can and must be controversial discussions and debates, says Hartmut Dorgerloh, general director of the Humboldt Forum Foundation. Dorgerloh is satisfied with the development of the Forum, especially the 1.5 million visitors it welcomed in its first year. Roughly 820,000 people visited the exhibitions, while the rest visited in the areas that are free and open to the general public, such as the foyer with its cafés, the Schlüterhof and the roof terrace. But these figures are limited in being able to gauge the success of the complex. As a result of the pandemic, museums all over the world experienced severe drops in the number of visitors they welcomed. In the pandemic year of 2021, the British Museum in London had only 1.3 million visitors. In the same timeframe, the Louvre, which is always a leader in terms of visitor numbers, received 2.8 million guests rather than its usual 9.6 million.

We'll have to wait to find out whether the Humboldt Forum will be able to match those numbers until international visitors are again able to travel without restrictions to Berlin. In the meantime, the Humboldt Forum will continue to function as a venue for exhibitions and cultural events, while also seeking to become a new piece of the city, that is, the finally completed center of Berlin. Shortly before the full opening, there was still a flurry of work being done in the exterior around the building: pavement was being laid, the garden areas were being planted and a long stone bench lining the south façade was being set up to separate the small green area from the urban space, much like a front garden would. Whereas this green area invites visitors to stop and linger, the terraces along the Spree still look rather sparse. Climate change has made Berlin summers very hot, which means that sitting on the stone feels like sitting on a hot plate. Like any new building, the Humboldt Forum will have to gradually fill itself with life. It's going to have to grow into itself in many different ways. Its mere 365 days of activity are hardly enough to complete that task – but its large portals are open and waiting.

Birgit Rieger is an editor for the Berlin daily *Der Tagesspiegel*.



PICTURE-ALLIANCE / BRANDSTAETTER IMAGES/ÖNB

Walther Rathenau, 1922

The stillbirth of democracy

Walther Rathenau was a one-of-a-kind politician – and Germany's beacon of hope in dark times, until right-wing terrorists assassinated him 100 years ago

By Stephan Abarbanell

June 24, 1922, was an unusually cool day for the time of year. At his villa in Berlin-Grunewald, Walther Rathenau was preparing to leave for the Foreign Ministry across town on Wilhelmstrasse. He had only one appointment on his calendar that Saturday morning. He told the policemen assigned to protect him that he wouldn't be needing them that day. And even though the dark and cloudy sky portended rain, he asked his driver to draw back the roof of his sleek convertible. The driver then opened the rear door of the car and held out his hand to help the distinguished gentleman into his seat. Rathenau loved his gray convertible with its red wheels. He'd picked it out himself. How much he would have loved to take the wheel himself that day.

Walther Rathenau had been foreign minister of the Weimar Republic for some time. He'd only recently returned from Berlin from a conference in Italy that would be of great importance to post-World-War-I Germany. In a town just outside of Genoa, he'd signed the German-Russian Treaty of Rapallo – against his better judgment. What he'd actually wanted to do at the conference in Genoa was foster the reintegration of Germany – a mistrusted and suspicious pariah since its defeat in World War I – into the community of Western states. Unfortunately, only Lenin's Russia had opened its doors to him and the German delegation. Rathenau returned to Berlin with a sense that the Treaty of Rapallo might be the greatest mistake of his political life – and perhaps the signature on his death warrant. He knew that it would give the right-wing camp a great deal of fodder – that they would inevitably insist that he, the Jew, had betrayed Germany.

And, indeed, soon after he set off from his villa that day, another car started its engine in stealth pursuit. Five minutes later, Walther Rathenau was dead. Three young men, members of a secret and violent right-wing organization, had shot him in his open convertible. Dressed in their long leather coats – already the common garb of national-socialist killers and bought by the men especially for this day – they sped away in their open-top car.

Walther Rathenau had long known he was a target of right-wing nationalists. As a wealthy politician, industrialist and cosmopolitan Jew who sought mutual understanding where others preached hatred, he received perhaps the most death threats of his era. He was used to seeing signs of the hatred towards him on an almost daily basis: in newspapers, in threatening letters and in big print on building walls.

A few days earlier, Rathenau's own chancellor had cautioned him that his life was in danger but he'd dismissed these warnings with his usual nonchalance. It was as if he saw some kind of ultimate perfection in death. In those final days, he even told a friend: "I'm like a person who sits on packed suitcases." Or perhaps he was just exhausted from all the conflicts at work, the anti-Semitic threats and the attacks from members of the right-wing opposition in parliament, which were clearly intended to incite violence against him. Only the day before, he'd been forced to listen to yet another hate-filled rant in the Reichstag. Walther Rathenau was not a career politician in the usual sense of the term. Having wanted to be so many things, he spent several years pursuing different interests. Most of all, he'd wanted to be an artist. He was an excellent writer and painter, and he was a gifted pianist. He was also good with numbers, effortlessly making calculations and generating forecasts. What was a young man supposed to do when he was capable of doing so much?

Rathenau knew that whatever he chose to do in his life, he would have to excel at it. This much was certain. And he would go on to do many different things very well, almost as if his life were a constant search for himself. He became an industrialist, an inventor, a patron of the arts, an author and – for a time – the darling of the Berlin salons. He was as wealthy as he was eloquent. He was charming yet unapproachable. And he did not become a politician until later in life.

Rathenau saw his Jewish heritage as both a burden and a mission. He never considered converting, and yet one might be forgiven for interpreting his flattering take on blond and blue-eyed Prussians and his occasional longing to belong to "mainstream society" – without all the hushed whispers as he walked by – as a veiled cry for help. The same applies to his flirtation with the right-wing nationalist thinker Wilhelm Schwaner. In other words, if you're looking to sketch an accurate image of Rathenau, you're going to need reams of paper.

And what about love? No doubt this topic deserves a chapter of its own. Rathenau is not known to have made any deep commitments. The longest he lasted was at the side of a married woman, Lili Deutsch, the wife of his father's closest colleague. She was a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, an advisor, a confidante, a woman never quite accessible and never entirely wanted. Lili Deutsch was also Jewish. She died fleeing the Nazis. Perhaps she, too, deserves her own chapter – not only as a friend and partner to Walther.

Rathenau's parents seem to have been quite certain that young Walther belonged at his father's side in the family's rapidly expanding business. While Walther was still a child, his father, Emil Rathenau had finally launched an enterprise after a successful round of funding from relatives and banks. Eventually, the elder Rathenau would turn this venture into a company he'd call AEG. At the International Exposition of Electricity in Paris in 1881, Rathenau senior had met the indefatigable American inventor Thomas Alva Edison, who'd offered him his latest patent, the light bulb. Emil Rathenau had been searching for an idea for years, so he immediately recognized the potential of this new invention and bought the European patent. It became a global success and marked the launch of what would soon become AEG's global electric empire.

Walther, however, wanted more. He wanted to do something other than head up companies and be a top networker in the new world of electricity. Of course, his other desires didn't stop him from first mastering this unwanted métier with astonishing success. He acted as AEG president for many years, even though he never held the reins of operations, no matter what the title suggested. As an industrialist and member of countless supervisory boards, he proved adept at developing long-term political strategies. The many books and articles he published, often in large numbers, bear witness to this. His tome *Von kommenden Dingen* (On Things to Come) was perhaps his magnum opus. Throughout all this, Rathenau remained a European at heart. In spite of noticeable fluctuations in his principles and occasional deflating setbacks stemming from the war, he believed cooperation, a balance of interests, common values and unity were essential to creating a peaceful Europe.

Surprisingly for Rathenau, as well as for many others, the hour of his greatest achievement came after Germany lost World War I and his country became internationally ostracized. As a man who moved seamlessly through many different worlds and was both credible and self-assured abroad, he was appointed to the cabinet by Chancellor Wirth, first as minister of reconstruction, then as foreign minister. His task in both positions was to save something that hardly seemed salvageable.

Rathenau's key message, which he also brought to the conference in Genoa, was the idea of a united Europe led by England, France and Germany. Later on, there would be an association with Russia, itself a country internationally sidelined after the Bolshevik Revolution. The prerequisite for this new Germany – one that would be met with respect among the community of states – was the fulfillment of the demands laid down by the Allies within the framework of the Treaty of Versailles. Rathenau's vision was one of a humble Germany, a smart Germany, a country that would emerge as an internationally respected partner and friend. From that moment on, his approach to politics was embodied in the word *Erfüllung*, fulfillment. And there he stood, time and again, promoting this approach, alone, ultimately surrounded by an aura of loneliness – and a wall of hate.

Rathenau's vision for Europe was killed along with him. It was not until 1945 that Konrad Adenauer – in his own way, in Cologne, and without any props to Rathenau – would take up this vision, with its formative and binding power that persists to this day.

On June 24, 1922, and in the days thereafter, as the news of Rathenau's murder spread like wildfire throughout the nation, many people in Germany may have sensed or suddenly realized that the Weimar Republic might be nearing its end. The funeral service and majestic state ceremony held for Rathenau on June 27 in the Reichstag was a final flash of hope for the republic. Never again after that day would so many Germans take to the streets in mourning. For one brief moment, a hushed silence came over the country. Perhaps the German public sensed that Rathenau's death marked the end of something that might have been a new beginning, but simply wasn't to be.

At the Bürgerbräukeller in Munich, a very different non-politician had long since been raging against Rathenau, his politics and the Treaty of Rapallo. One year later, this individual would lead a group of men on a march to the Feldherrenhalle, a coup d'état the English-speaking world continues to refer to somewhat belittlingly as the *Beer Hall Putsch*. The rest is history, a very dark history.

Walther Rathenau never received any popular or long-lasting veneration, despite his tremendous charisma and the importance of his efforts in the service of democracy and Europe. Sure, there are many schools, streets and squares that continue to bear his name, but he remains one of Germany's greatest forgotten figures. Indeed, the events of 1933 and all that followed led to an enduring suppression of his memory and impact.

And yet it's never too late to give Rathenau his due – when we recall his efforts to tackle the issues of his time, we're led straight to the problems we continue to face today.

Stephan Abarbanell's novel *10 Uhr 50, Grunewald* on the life of Walther Rathenau was published to critical acclaim in June 2022 by Blessing Publishers.

Life of the party

Covid-19 couldn't keep our author off Berlin's world-famous dance floors. A personal history | By Julia Kalsbach

It was a Sunday morning in early February 2020. I was a bit excited as I stood alongside my friend beneath the legendary building in Berlin-Friedrichshain. The bass was booming and colorful lights were flickering out of the windows. It wasn't my first time standing here in the long line to get into Berghain. And yet I always get butterflies whenever I reach the front of the line. A quick glance, a question about my age, the inevitable hesitation, a hushed whisper to the other doorman and then, bang, I'm in! At this point, I usually want to jump for joy, but no – I have to remain cool! After all, we're talking about Berghain. It isn't just *the* best club in the city, but the very embodiment of Berlin's world-famous nightlife. What makes the place so hard to describe is its mix of party people, extravagant personalities and the best DJs the scene has to offer. That night we danced, laughed and got lost in the sway of the crowd. But it also isn't just the music and the dancing that make clubbing so special. It's the people you get to know, the carefree embraces and the idea that we're all here to enjoy the moment, together. Plus, it puts a good 16 extra miles on your pedometer. On that Sunday in February, we left the temple of techno with smiles on our faces and a slew of fantastic new memories.

At the time, if someone had told me it was going to be my last night at Berghain for a long time, I would've probably flipped them the bird and maybe even laughed in their face. But we all remember the horrors that were fast approaching in February 2020. Two weeks after my Berghain visit, I found myself sitting on my couch at home – alone. As the saying goes, you don't know what you've got till it's gone. The first couple of weekends during the pandemic lockdown – how can I put this – *took some getting used to*. Working from home, exercising at home, no more going to restaurants, no cultural events, no parties – Berlin's otherwise so vibrant way of life had ground to a halt, and no one knew how long it would stay that way.

Soon after that, a small glimmer of hope brought light into the darkness – infection rates began to drop and bars and restaurants started opening their doors for at least a few hours. The summer that followed was a bit different than usual and – here's that expression again – *took some getting used to*. Parties were moved to bars, or rather out front of bars, to parks and then to our own apartments. We knew it was up to us to bring back at least a smidgen of normality, joie de vivre and, yes, fun into our lives. But even though it was great to know that bars and restaurants were opening again, there was always one specific feeling in the air – the sense that everything just wasn't the same as it had been before. As much as

SHUTTERSTOCK/STEVE_PHOTOGRAPHY

Bunker mentality: the world-famous *Berghain* in Berlin

I enjoyed going out and escaping my mundane life at home, I couldn't shake a particular sense of dread; it was the fear of catching the virus, in one way or another.

Let's fast-forward a bit. In 2021, thanks to the new vaccines and testing on almost every corner, things returned to something approaching normal. But what did it all mean for those of us who love to party? We were going to have to be patient for a little bit longer. Most of the clubs didn't open their doors until the advent of summer, and winter definitely took its time saying goodbye. But then the moment came: I finally found myself standing in line again in front of the club. (I never thought I'd use the word "finally" in the context of waiting in line.)

But, yes, I was so happy to be able to dance again and escape the monotonous routine of everyday life in the Covid-19 era – so happy that even the act of standing in line outside the club somehow became a pleasure. There I was, lining up in front of a club with the entirely appropriate name of Sisyphos. It was a very long line – and it's true, we were all dying to get to the dance floor! But what had actually changed?

Even before heading out, it was obvious things weren't the same. Before the pandemic, our evenings were spontaneous; we'd base our choice of club on where my friends and I were in the city at that moment or what kind of music we felt like dancing to. And it didn't matter whether it was Berghain, Sisyphos, Watergate or about.blank – the possibilities were endless. Of course, in the second year of the pandemic, we still had our choice of clubs, but most promoters weren't allowed to fill their clubs to capacity due to the Covid-19 restrictions. For us, rather than buying our tickets at the box office like we used to, it meant buying them days in advance, online. It was like making an appointment at the hairdresser or, horror of horrors, at the dentist. But the process of booking tickets early had both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, we suddenly had a guarantee of actually getting into the club. On the other, all the spontaneity was gone. On top of that, the price of admission went up. Let's be honest, though, we were all very happy to pay the extra cost at the time, just so our beloved clubs would somehow make it through the pandemic after a year in the doldrums.

But let's get back to me standing in line at Sisyphos, after going for one-and-a-half years without that wonderful mix of dancing, droning bass and sweaty bodies wherever you look. In the line, everything was the way it used to be, except that everyone was wearing a mask. By that time, however, masks had somehow become completely normal. As soon as we got to the doormen, my friends and I pulled out our winning trifecta: our vaccination certificates, our same-day Covid-19 tests and, of course, our ticket to the club. Once everything was checked, we were in! It was actually quite pleasant not to be judged by our appearances for once.

And in the club itself? At Sisyphos, only the outside dance floors were open, and only until 10pm. The fact that the party was going to end so early was something we acknowledged and accepted. The only thing that mattered at that moment was that we enjoyed ourselves as long as we could! But it was different. We were more careful. We didn't drink out of the same glass anymore, we didn't share cigarettes and we pretty much kept to ourselves. We didn't dance with strangers, let alone embrace anyone we didn't know. In other words, we didn't do the things that give clubbing its special charm – all of those things were gone. But on that first night, it did us so much good just to be in a club again. And it wouldn't be the last time. Even though the rate of infection rose again in the fall and winter, the clubs stayed open. And we very quickly got used to our "new" mode of partying.

Fast forward to 2022, when most of the Covid-19 restrictions started to fall away. The thing we'd been waiting for so long had finally arrived: our first night clubbing without any restrictions. This time, there wasn't anything that *required some getting used to*. It was just nice. I embraced complete strangers, danced the night away and felt that sense of freedom – we were back to enjoying life again! In fact, life this past summer felt almost like it did before the pandemic.

Even with regard to clubbing? Um, I'm going to say yes, for now. But can we talk about tomorrow, well, tomorrow?

Julia Kalsbach is an author living and working in Berlin.

The Berlin Times

THE GLOBAL NEWSPAPER FROM THE GERMAN CAPITAL

A hello to arms

Berlin's established Slavic diasporas welcome a new one in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine | By Vera Koshkina

SHUTTERSTOCK/PIKEPICTURE, MONTAGE BLNT

The first person I helped off the train at Berlin Central Station was a man about my father's age, in his early 60s. He held a cane in one hand, the left side of his body limp, and was trying to descend the steps of the train while also holding on to a small backpack. More experienced volunteers were already helping the large groups of women and children who got off first and seemed to be traveling in small clans. The man was the last person off the train, probably due to his restricted mobility. I instinctively took his bag and gave him my hand. It was day six of the war. I asked him in Russian, my native language, if he needed help, and he seemed relieved to be able to communicate since the train conductors spoke only German. He apologized for being unshaved and unwashed, explaining that he had been traveling from Kyiv for three days now. "You won't believe it," he said, "they are really bombing Kyiv!"

I came to the station after signing up for a "shift" through a Telegram channel called Berlin Arrival Support. The channel was run by a volunteer organization that sprung up spontaneously at the main bus and train stations of Berlin in the first days of the war. A sign-up link was provided on the channel. I followed the link and selected the station Berlin Hauptbahnhof, the time slot 9pm–12am, and my language skills: Russian, English, German. It also provided some basic information and guidelines for conduct: get a yellow vest and sign in before beginning your shift; everyone is welcome regardless of passport; unaccompanied minors are to be taken to the children's tent and registered with a child services coordinator. There is hot food, clothing and toiletries in a makeshift "welcome center" on the lower level of the station near the McDonalds. People traveling to other cities within Germany can travel on for free. The channel also provided a running list of arriving trains, with staggering numbers of people, mostly refugees, on board: Warsaw 22:40 – 1,500; Prague 23:10 – 1,000. As I later learned, in the first weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine Berlin was receiving close to 15,000 refugees per day.

Hand-drawn signs with Ukrainian flags and scribbled instructions were hung all around the otherwise glossy and sleek train station, pointing to the makeshift welcome center on the lower level. As I slowly walked the man over to the elevators, he asked me where I was from. The volunteer guidelines discouraged us from asking personal questions of the new arrivals, but the man seemed eager to relate, asking me about my life in Berlin. I told him I was born in Minsk, but that I had grown up in Chicago and had now been living in Berlin for four years. On hearing that I have a toddler, he shared that he has a two-year-old granddaughter in Moscow. He explained that his ex-wife was Russian, and that they had lived in his native Kyiv until the divorce. His daughter now lives in Moscow with her family. "It's very hard to talk these days," he said ruefully. "They say the war is our fault."

Thousands of Berliners showed up to train and bus stations in the early days to offer their couches or rides to those fleeing the war. They were crowded together on the lower level, holding cardboard signs that read "one bedroom can sleep up to 3 ppl" and "a couch in a shared flat all women." A volunteer coordinator in an orange vest was running around wielding a megaphone. I approached and explained that the man I was helping has limited mobility because of a stroke some years back. The medical staff at the station judged him to be too mobile to be taken to the hospital so we would need to find him accessible accommodation. Within minutes, the coordinator produced a young couple who lived in a building with an elevator and had a car. The couple greeted the new arrival and took his small backpack. We said an awkward good bye and he was gone. In the coming weeks I would have dozens of such encounters.

In the first days of the war, I felt a persistent shakiness, an adrenal charge. I wrote to a Kyiv-based colleague who showed me around Kyiv just a few years back and received no response. The relatives of our nanny, originally from Ukraine, were sitting in the basement of their apartment building in Kharkiv for the third day now. "Seven people, four children and three adults," she specified, as we stood in my kitchen one evening. Unable to work or focus on anything other than the news, I remember calling a Berlin-based Russian friend whose husband was Ukrainian, and who shared photos from the anti-war protests at the Brandenburg Gate on social media. "We went as a family," she wrote under one protest photo. "What are we supposed to do?" I asked her when she answered the phone. She confessed that she had not slept for days. Her husband's friends were in a basement in Odesa. We agreed that it seemed we now lived in a split reality. Though disturbed by news of war, Berliners continued to go about their lives, going to work, to shops, to cafés. Because of our ties to the region, daily life felt impossible. We both started going to the train station to fight the feeling of total helplessness.

The vast majority of arrivals spoke no German or English. Posts on the Telegram channel urged Ukrainian and Russian speakers to come join the meeting effort. Berlin has a large Ukrainian and Russian speaking diaspora community, or rather communities, from across the post-Soviet space. There are the *Russlanddeutsche,* ethnic Germans who have been living in the Russian empire since the 18th century and retained their German language while also speaking Russian. In the 20th century, these communities were exiled to Ukraine and Kazakhstan, with nearly 2.5 million eventually migrating to Germany. There are the Soviet Jews, who came to Germany as refugees and were granted asylum because of institutionalized discrimination by the Soviets. Most are originally from Ukraine and Belarus, and came largely in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Finally, there are the ethnic Ukrainians and Russians who came to Germany to study or work, part of the "brain drain" of the post-Soviet era. Very different in their citizenship and national allegiances, education level and class, these groups share language and the Soviet and post-Soviet cultural reference. They interact cautiously with one another, with ethnic conflicts and historical traumas of discrimination and dislocation lingering just beneath the surface. There are shops, restaurants, daycare centers and schools in Berlin that cater to all these groups and operate in Russian, which continues to serve as the common language. In the first weeks of the war, these were the people who came to the stations to meet those fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

On subsequent nights I would volunteer by turns in food distribution, the children's corner and the infant tent. The tent was filled with piles of diapers, containers of formula, donated strollers and baby clothing. The inside was darkened to provide some protection from the sharp lighting of the train station, and to offer privacy to nursing mothers. One night, as I made bottles for two ten-month-old girls, their mother changed their diapers, freeing them by turns from their winter jackets. The girls looked fatigued beyond crying. The woman had only one small backpack for all three of them, no diapers and no extra clothing. I explained that the diapers and baby clothes in the tent were free for the taking and she made some selections with evident relief. An older couple with a wheelchair-bound man approached and asked if we had adult diapers. By miracle we did, and the woman proceeded to help the man into the tent and out of his clothing. The man's wheelchair had one broken wheel and I spent my remaining hours at the station unsuccessfully trying to find a replacement chair.

Cities in Eastern and Southern Ukraine such as Kharkiv and Mariupol were bombed heaviest in the early days. They also held the most Russian speakers, so Russian-speaking help was in particular need at the station. A conflict erupted among volunteers when people were asked to place stickers with Russian, Ukrainian, British or German flags on their yellow vests to indicate the languages they spoke. Initially the volunteers would scribble their languages in marker on electric tape and attach it to their vest for the duration of their shift. Flags seemed more economical to local volunteer coordinators, who were most concerned with the practicalities of offering aid. On social media, Ukrainians who also spoke Russian expressed outrage at the possibility of wearing a Russian flag. A friend of mine who is a Russian citizen, but is Udmurt, an ethnic minority in Russia numbering about half a million people, also complained about the flags. As I read her complaint, I remembered her telling me about the Soviet suppression of the Udmurt language, and the self-immolation of a leading Udmurt linguist in protest against removing the language from the local school curricula. She came to the station to help in Russian because that was the only language in which she could help. She did not want to wear a Russian flag while doing it. The flags were eventually taken out of circulation.

These days, my German partner experiences the war primarily through the energy crisis panic in the media. Our gas bills are projected to triple this coming winter. For me, the proximity of the war continues to be linguistic. I hear a constant stream of Ukrainian and Russian all around Berlin, in buses and trains, in shops and on the playground. Children approach my son on the swing set upon hearing us interact in Russian. They assume we are refugees. On hearing we are "local" parents, they ask for advice about life in Berlin.

On a recent afternoon at our neighborhood playground, a chatty five-year-old asked where I was from, to which I replied that I am from Minsk. "Is that the city that got completely destroyed by bombs?" she asked, possibly thinking of Mariupol, another "M" city. She quickly moved on, telling me her age and pointing out her mom, aunt and baby cousin nearby. Words poured out of her, and I recognized her desire to speak from my own experience of childhood linguistic isolation. In our first month in the US, before I spoke any English, I remembered overwhelming any Russian speaker I met with streams of words. I encouraged her conversation. She said she also speaks Ukrainian and was curious about my son's German. I clarified that he was born here in Berlin and speaks German with his father and in daycare. "My papa and grandpa are still in Ukraine," she explained. "I also go to daycare, but I don't understand anything," she confessed, "so I cry all the time." A voluble kid, she got quiet for a moment. "It is getting better," she concluded. "I cry less and less."

Vera Koshkina is a Slavicist and film historian living and working in Berlin.

PHILIPP VON RECKLINGHAUSEN (2)

Getting this show on the road: the Easy Rider exhibition in Berlin

Like riding a bike

Berliners are increasingly using their bicycles to get where they need to go – and changing the face of the city | By Ludwig Lohmann

It's early in the morning when we set off on our bicycles for the ride from Neukölln to Berlin-Mitte. School is back in session, so the traffic on Hermannstrasse is already jammed in both directions. If you're physically up to it, cycling is usually the fastest and most interesting way to get around Berlin. Public transportation is often unreliable, and if you take your car, you often spend more time standing still than actually moving. Even on a bicycle, however, you're going to need nerves of steel to make your way through Berlin traffic. And that's a shame, because Berlin could be the epitome of an ecologically progressive "cycling city." It has many wide and airy streets and, in contrast to Paris and London, a relatively low level of densely built-up urban areas. So there's plenty of room for bike lanes and safe intersections. And yet, on our ride this morning, cycling on Hermannstrasse feels more like engaging in an extreme sport. Even on this almost 200-foot-wide street, there's still no bike lane, at least not on large parts of it. To our right, a constant flow of cars vigorously overtake us and our fellow cyclists. Plus, thanks to the car-friendly traffic lights, we're forced to stop at almost every intersection.

It doesn't have to be this way. In 2018, the state government, led by a coalition of SPD, Die Linke and the Greens, passed the Berlin Mobility Act. It's considered to be the first state cycling law in Germany and emerged after massive pressure from a local referendum. On paper, the law looks very good – it marks the first time pedestrians and cyclists are prioritized over motorized private transport. The law also fosters the expansion of Berlin's cycling network by rededicating car-parking spaces to bike lanes, creating 100,000 new bicycle parking spaces, giving priority to more vulnerable traffic participants at intersections and adapting traffic light settings to the speed of cyclists. Since 2018, an average of around 31 miles of new bike lanes have been built every year in Berlin. Unfortunately, there are still many streets in the city that look like sketches of the car-centric city popular in the 1970s – that is, six lanes and lots of parking spaces. Some of Berlin's most recent construction projects don't even meet the standards contained in the new law, because their planning stage took place prior to 2018. One of the biggest problems in implementing the law is the fact that responsibility for planning major roads in Berlin lies with the federal government, whereas smaller roads are in the hands of individual boroughs. Responsibilities often move back and forth between the authorities, and staff shortages are common. As a result, forward-thinking mobility designs often end up collecting dust. Even the "bicycle path network" launched in 2021 by Green Transportation Senator Regine Günther is only very slowly improving the situation on the roads.

But sometimes, things actually go faster than expected on the streets of Berlin. After reaching Hermannplatz, we continue north along Kottbusser Damm. A couple of years ago, this key artery between Neukölln and Kreuzberg was one of the most dangerous streets in the city: two lanes of car traffic in each direction, a lane of parked cars on each side plus double-parked cars every few feet. The Covid-19 pandemic triggered a significant change in streets like this. During the first wave, as many people stopped driving to their offices, car traffic throughout Berlin slackened. Simultaneous to that, a lot of people started to fear they might catch Covid-19 on public transport. It was in this period that Transportation Senator Günther gave the green light for so-called "pop-up bike lanes" on Kottbusser Damm and several other major thoroughfares. This involved taking a lane originally intended for cars and repurposing it as a bike lane separated from the rest of the traffic by bollards. It resulted in the creation of bike lanes more than two meters wide, which led to a whole new feeling of security for cyclists. When the Covid-19 wave subsided and car traffic increased again, the traffic chaos many had predicted would grip Berlin failed to materialize. The boroughs realized that their streets could work well even with one less car lane. Pop-up bike lanes thus became a permanent fixture on many major streets.

At the end of Kottbusser Damm, we finally reach Kottbusser Tor. It's a confusing traffic junction that marks the meeting of six streets. At the southwest arc of the traffic circle, there's a so-called *Geisterrad*, a bicycle painted all-white and placed wherever a cyclist has had a fatal accident. Every year, an average of ten cyclists are killed in Berlin, mostly as a result of trucks turning right that fail to notice a cyclist pedaling straight ahead. These accidental fatalities are considered preventable, because the relevant technology – a driver-assistance system referred to in German as an *Abbiegeassistent* – has been available for years. It's a camera system that works by triggering a truck's brakes in situations in which pedestrians or cyclists are in danger. It costs approximately €3,000 per vehicle to retrofit, and starting in 2022, the technology will be mandatory for newly registered vehicles weighing over 3.5 tons. The process of retrofitting older vehicles is subsidized by Germany's Federal Ministry of Transport. Unfortunately, these systems are not yet mandatory in urban centers. Instead, new ghost bikes are still having to be installed time and again at intersections like Kottbusser Tor and many others in Berlin.

> CYCLING IS A WAY OF LIFE AND A FORM OF PROTEST. WHEN A LARGE GROUP OF PEOPLE CYCLE TOGETHER, IT LEADS TO CHANGE.

The goal of achieving zero traffic fatalities in Berlin – referred to as "Vision Zero" – thus remains a utopian vision. Even though many civil-society associations are continuing to do everything they can to make Berlin a bicycle-friendly city. In Kreuzberg, for example, there's an organization called the *Netzwerk fahrradfreundliches Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg*, a network of bicycle-friendly activists.

Since 2021, a campaign by the name of Berlin Autofrei has called for a complete ban on private motor-vehicle transport in Berlin. It might sound like an extreme position to take, but the facts speak for the concept. The core of the campaign rests on the manner in which public space is used. For example, in Berlin's city center, 58 percent of public space is used by automobiles, but only 30 percent of trips are made by car and only roughly 30 percent of Berliners even own a car in the first place. Most of the cars in the city stand around unused for more than 22 hours a day. In some cases, this has a massive impact on the quality of life in neighborhoods and hinders safety for pedestrians and cyclists on the streets. The campaign organizers see the decisions made by Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo as exemplary; she permanently closed entire streets to cars and, after an initial round of criticism, was re-elected. The decision to make similar changes was recently made in London, as well. In other words, even if conservative circles work hard to portray the problem in a certain light, the demands made by the Berlin activists are not as far-fetched as one might think.

From Kottbusser Tor, it's only a few minutes by bike to Mariannenplatz. At 8 pm on the last Friday of every month, perhaps the funniest and largest group of bicycle activists meet for a large-scale parade of bicycles called Critical Mass (CM), a type of demonstration that first appeared in San Francisco in 1992. The movement hinges on a peculiarity in traffic laws, namely that a group of more than 15 cyclists is seen as constituting a critical mass; this means that the group can be classified a vehicle according to traffic law. In other words, when the first person in the group cycles through a green light, the whole group is allowed to follow, even if the light turns red in the meantime. With a membership of up to 3,000 cycling enthusiasts in the summer, a CM like this can extend up to several miles and have a considerable impact on city traffic. The activists' credo is: "We're not hindering the traffic, we *are* the traffic." They also correctly point to the fact that at all other times cyclists are the ones expected to adapt to traffic jams caused by cars.

On the last Friday of every month, the balance of power on the streets of Berlin is turned upside down. Since this column of sound-bikes, pimped-up low-riders, family cargo bikes and stylish fixed-gear bikes is not officially a demonstration, there's no set route. They merely exploit Germany's *Straßenverkehrsordnung* or StVO – that tongue-twisting law that regulates street traffic – and let cyclists at the front of the pack determine the route. This can get dangerous, of course, especially when motorists insist on their right to use the road in the manner to which they are accustomed, that is, in an utterly privileged way. By means of a process called "corking," that is, by securing intersections with standing cyclists and calmly trying to persuade car drivers to be patient, these large-scale nighttime rides through the inner city usually get by without police intervention. And anyone who's ever ridden down the grand Kurfürstendamm in Berlin as part of a subdued group of cyclists to the sounds of house music will no doubt want to do it again. Even without big placards, CM's political message is convincing, if only thanks to the fun of cycling on the big open streets.

Loads of space, cycling fun, safe roads and an enjoyably calm atmosphere – it sounds like a utopia in our overcrowded inner cities. And precisely this utopian potential of cycling was the subject of an exhibition that took place just a few kilometers away from Mariannenplatz at the Märkisches Museum in the spring of 2022. We rode to the museum to take a closer look at the presentation.

Conceived by musuku – Museum der Subkulturen – and shown in cooperation with the Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin, the exhibition portrayed various subcultures and bicycle-centered communities under the title "Easy Rider Road Show." It conveyed the wild, subversive side of cycling and the powerful connection that bicycles can create between people. The photographs took us around the world, like to an annual festival of self-made bicycles in New York and a youth-oriented cycling movement that rides across London doing wheelies. In Mexico City, former gang members discovered their love of extravagant bikes, and in Berlin, punks battle it out on penny-farthings in a kind of jousting tournament. It's only fitting, then, that the Easy Rider Road Show got its start as a rolling exhibition installed on five cargo bikes. Like the solar sails of a spaceship, they folded out in the middle of the urban space to create a photo exhibition. This is yet another thing bicycles are capable of – suddenly declaring Berlin's Schlossplatz to be a temporary exhibition space, thereby reclaiming a piece of the city.

Cycling is much more than just a form of transportation. Cycling culture engages in a permanent give-and-take with the worlds of fashion, music, design, politics, urban planning and traffic systems. Cycling is also a way of life and a form of protest. When a large group of people cycle together, it leads to change. Indeed, bicycles have the potential to transform life in the city – and ultimately the city itself. We become very aware of this again at the Easy Rider Road Show in the Märkisches Museum, the last station on our bicycle tour through Berlin. Sipping on a cold *Radler* – a popular drink made of beer and sparkling lemon-flavored soda, but also the German word for cyclist – and enjoying our view of the River Spree, we can't wait for Berlin to further realize its potential as a "cycling city."

Playing in traffic: the exhibition was conceived by *musuku – Museum der Subkulturen* – and shown in cooperation with the Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin

Ludwig Lohmann works at an independent publishing house in Berlin. He is an event organizer, a literary critic and a self-professed bicycle activist. He does not own a car.

Anke Fesel moved to Berlin in 1990. In 2007, she co-founded the photo agency bobsairport. She also heads up CAPA, a Berlin-based design studio.

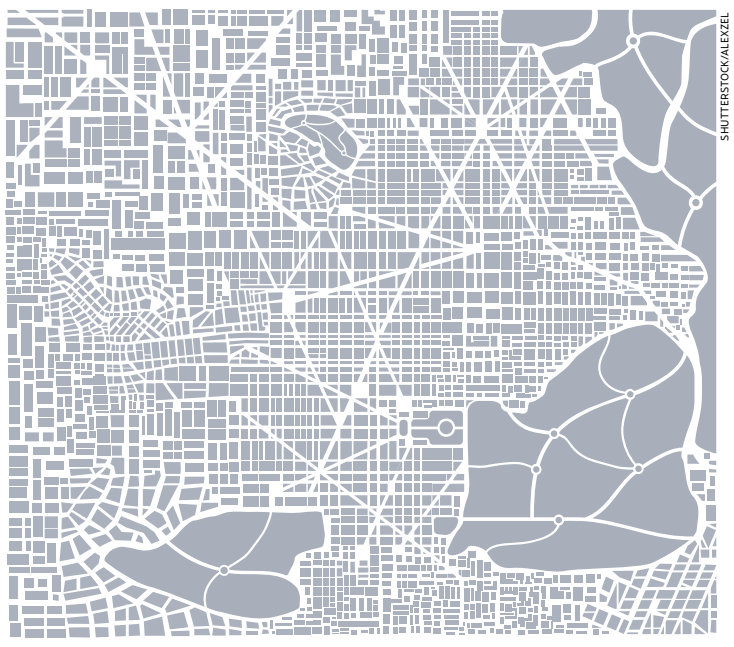
A tale of new cities

On the value of urban friction | By Carsten Schmidt

Throughout history, city planners, architects and landscape architects have pondered the question of how we want to live together. The many planned and unplanned cities we inhabit are an architectural testament to the many answers found over time. So strong are the different schools of thought that a glance at a figure-ground map should be enough to read the larger history and identity of a city. Time, place and the specific political context of its inception are strong denominators for its urban fabric; only catastrophes, like the Fire of London or the urban warfare of World War II, create holes big enough to correct for earlier mistakes. It is easy to work on a blank canvas but hard to change something built. Limited space for error gives city planning relevance and emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical development of this field.

While city planning as a conscious act of pre-conceiving urban fabric can be dated back as far as 4000 BC to the ancient Sumerians and later the ancient Greeks, for a critic of today's planning practice it is enough to understand the more recent developments. During the Renaissance, cities started to grow and fill up with people, while they were still shaped largely by their fortification systems, and thereby finite city limits. Cities started extending beyond their walls and became defined by primary straight streets. During this time, symmetry becomes a dominant design driver and axial lines lead to predefined views of monuments and buildings. New residential districts are based on the grid and enclose plazas, squares and parks. The industrial revolution further accelerates urbanization and leads to increasingly congested and stressed city cores. Ideas of an ideal city resurface and often disparage the city in a form of anti-urbanism. Paired with the experiences of the World Wars, we see sub-urbanization and a strong separation of uses as the main form of post-war urban development. The modern city is a rational one with a strong hierarchy that reduces density and tries to place the city dweller back into the green.

Urban planning today is caught in the ambiguity of decision-making that lacks a visible stance or vision. The half-open, semi-public block with multi-residential mixed use at four to six stories dominates the top locations in public competitions, and it rarely comes alone. Frequently, the scope for city planning projects comprises multiple hundreds of units, thereby determining large swatches of our future city life. This becomes an issue as we are caught in an in-between state of approaches that only goes halfway before turning around again. Instead of fully embracing the city and creating the density necessary to sustain an active city life, the distances between buildings and the height of the buildings themselves are still reminiscent of old *Ideal City* ideas. We speak as if we want city life but we build as if we live in the country. Density is the driver for all related issues that make contemporary


SHUTTERSTOCK/ALEXZEL

city planning a disappointment. The idea of layering uses to create activity throughout the day and thereby increase safety, interaction and access while reducing travel and carbon footprints can only work if it is provided with the necessary density to sustain each of these uses. Equally, ground floor activation and the integration of public space as a fluid inside/outside concept only works if enough uses can be layered to attract large numbers of people making the programming of these spaces viable.

Lastly, we exacerbate the consequences of a lack of density and its effect on use and ground floor activation through the sheer scale of our projects, which create entire districts of quiet city deserts. Large-scale projects also exclude a majority of stakeholders from the process of urban development and leave it to fewer, bigger players, which tend to be risk averse. But we need risk, because currently we are unwilling to let go of the rationality and simplicity we have become accustomed to. Moreover, the city needs friction; it needs conflict for new social spaces to emerge. The quality of life produced is not necessarily low, but it is boring and leaves us unsatisfied and longing for a more stimulating and sometimes even exhilarating environment. Helmut Schmidt, the former German chancellor, once said that anyone having "visions" should seek medical treatment and I believe that this quote is an expression of a very post-war German sentiment of looking for as much rationality as possible while being overly careful about taking clear stances.

In my work, I enjoy taking a stance even when there's a possibility I might be wrong. I, therefore, set out to describe a form of city planning that can overcome the issues of current-day approaches by treating change as fundamentally urban and the city as a space of the unexpected. First and foremost, I believe that the urban needs a minimum level of density that can sustain multiple, layered uses. This density is to be understood not only in height-related terms but also in a sense of proximity. Both height and proximity should have a density relationship which means that if we build lower we should also build closer. Making out faces on the other side of the street can be a very good thing, and a tall building in the middle of green space can also be a good thing. A higher density in both cases allows for more activation and more layered uses. This layering not only relates to uses but also to users and user groups. All socioeconomic strata should be able to find a home in the same house.

Many issues we find with certain housing types in Germany stem from the lack of a true mix of uses and users rather than the specific uses and users themselves. Commercial, retail, gastronomy, residential, manufacturing, education, industry 4.0 and health care units can move in with the different user groups and create a truly mixed neighborhood. With this level of density and layered uses and users, we can then examine the ground floor activation and only then propose a new model. As a design office, we have great interest in curation as a form of programming. Our curation of spaces is a conscious act, which touches both the inside and outside together with a soupçon of measured uncertainty. By focusing on the accidental, we believe that a portion of all interior and exterior places should contribute to this curation and that these spaces should be inextricably linked, leaving no gap between landscape architecture and interior. Through a process of organic growth that does not shy away from colliding spaces and productive conflict, the end product – the city – is an outcome of gradual development that negotiates the space we inhabit between all social groups at all stages of life. The city needs the friction of its becoming. This is not an antithesis to conscious planning but a plea for a more procedural approach and continued care from the side of city planners, architects and landscape architects.

Considering the various challenges facing our cities today, we as designers must be willing to take a stance. What our current approach jeopardizes is not the city itself, but some less tangible urban qualities. The essence of the city and the driver of its vibrancy is the friction that arises from people who meet in a place they otherwise would never have met. In the service of this intangible urban aspect, I will always be willing to go to the doctor and get my vision checked.

Carsten Schmidt is an associate partner at Topotek 1, an architecture and landscape studio in Berlin and Zurich.

UDO ERDENREICH

Fork(s) in the road: Bergmannstrasse in Berlin-Kreuzberg isn't just a street; it's a way of life.

Street fight

The Bergmannkiez in Berlin-Kreuzberg has the potential to be the neighborhood of the future – if it weren't for the endless disputes | By Anne-Kattrin Palmer

It's a warm day in the neighborhood along Bergmannstrasse, that small section of Berlin-Kreuzberg known as the *Bergmannkiez*. Students, tourists, mothers and young children sit in the cafés that line the street. Children romp through the water in the fountain at Marheinekeplatz, while their parents linger on nearby benches.

A boy leans casually against the pole of a traffic light. His long hair is dyed blue and he's holding a violin case. The man standing next to him is wearing a tailored dark suit and looking incessantly at his cell phone.

Behind them is the famous Marheineke Markthalle, an indoor farmer's market featuring organic food stands and spice stalls. In front of them is Bergmannstrasse – and a forest of traffic signs. Everywhere you turn, there's a sign. It's as if someone sprinkled them like confetti on the multi-lane street. Two signs, both calling attention to the fact that the street is an official 10 km/h zone, are practically right next to one another. There are also additional pedestrian, bicycle and one-way signs. And if that wasn't enough sheet metal on display, there's also a large trash container at the side of the road.

The signs have been there for only a few weeks, but they bear witness to something that's been going on for years on Bergmannstrasse's bumpy road to becoming an innovative urban neighborhood of the future. Local authorities have tried one ambitious experiment after the next here on one of Berlin's most famous streets and in an area that attracts thousands of tourists each year. If the Bergmannkiez were a sick patient, you might say the doctor has insisted on treating only some peripheral symptoms; an infusion here, an injection there. But the treatment doesn't seem to have helped. In fact, the patient is far from being healed and perhaps appears even a little worse for wear. Still, the end of the story is neither here nor there, which is typical for the entire city. The Bergmannkiez functions like a magnifying glass that effectively displays the areas in Berlin where the most work needs to be done.

It's all about model projects and a climate-neutral future. City planners are eager to turn the Bergmannkiez into a showpiece for the neighborhood of the future – lots of green areas, a watercourse in the middle, spaces to hang out, fewer parking spaces and a car-free zone that stretches for at least 1,640 feet. A city like Copenhagen, which is well on its way to becoming the first climate-neutral city in the world by 2025, has long since recognized the importance of these issues and already started greening-up its streets and buildings, creating climate-friendly niches wherever possible. Cities are also banning cars from downtown areas due to their C02 emissions. In Berlin, these kinds of efforts are still in their infancy. The city features hardly any pedestrian zones, so where even to begin?

This is why there are so many trial balloons being floated. And one of the most popular venues for these trial projects just happens to be busy Bergmannstrasse, a street less than one mile long.

This is probably also why supporters and opponents have been at loggerheads over these measures for years. Some residents call for protests against the plans implemented by those green politicians who regularly achieve clear majorities in the neighborhood. Time and again, town hall meetings have generated plenty of uproar.

Many residents feel looked down upon, others think their businesses will be damaged if cars are no longer allowed on the street. And still others are simply annoyed to no end by the eternal back and forth. At the heart of it all, however, is the question of who exactly owns the neighborhood. The business owners or the eco-freaks? Those who have cars or the cyclists and pedestrians? They all claim the neighborhood for themselves.

It also has to do with gentrification. Many of the hipsters who moved into the area – most of them young, wealthy and with families in tow – have forced older residents out of the chic turn-of-the-century buildings with their creaky floorboards and stucco ceilings. And they've been putting their stamp on the neighborhood ever since.

For example, a gallery recently had to make way for an organic food store. And the junk stores of yesteryear are disappearing rapidly, with only a few left. And now, it's car drivers' time to disappear; but not all of them, just half.

This is why the remodeling of Bergmannstrasse – which also turns into a popular "party mile" in the evenings – is proceeding at a snail's pace. It often looks as if it's being carried out with no coherent plan to speak of. Just look at the recent decision to make the street an official 10 km/h zone shortly after designating it a 20 km/h zone. And there are many other projects that make the series of changes implemented on the path to a climate-friendly neighborhood look like pure folly. Not to mention the fact that while the new speed limit has been set, there's hardly any monitoring of whether anybody abides it.

MANY OF THE HIPSTERS WHO MOVED INTO THE AREA – MOST OF THEM YOUNG, WEALTHY AND WITH FAMILIES IN TOW – HAVE FORCED OLDER RESIDENTS OUT OF THE CHIC TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY BUILDINGS WITH THEIR CREAKY FLOORBOARDS AND STUCCO CEILINGS.

The famous Kommedia bookstore next to the Marheineke Markthalle is a shop as independent as they come. When asked about Bergmannstrasse, the salesperson sighs: "Everything's in a constant state of flux here; there's no such thing as downtime," she says. "The street is expected to reinvent itself on a constant basis." The bookstore is one of the most popular sites on the street, and its display windows feature some of the hottest books on the market. I ask the young woman what she would recommend right now, and she goes to the window and brings me the last copy of popular Ukrainian author Andrey Kurkov's latest novel *Samson and Nadezhda*.

Many people meet in the bookstore. Sometimes they already know one another, but other times they just come by to browse. People often end up engaged in a short or longer discussion with each other. In 2011, this way of life was given an official stamp: city planners decreed that this stretch of street in Berlin would be designated as an official *Begegnungszone*, a kind of "meeting zone." From that moment on, this term became one of the most irritating words people in the neighborhood had ever heard. First and foremost, because it could be interpreted in so many different ways. But most of all because the neighborhood simply didn't need any more opportunities to "meet up." It already had bars and restaurants where the wait staff switched easily between English and German. And it already had stylish boutiques where you could buy things like self-made pottery and colorful tunics. The neighborhood is indeed unique, and everybody who lives there swears by it. For them and many others, however, there are enough "meetings" and no need for any more, especially ones designated by city officials.

The inventiveness of urban planners has nonetheless continued unabated, and they're always trying to keep their finger on the pulse of the time. At one point, city workers were seen garnishing the street at one intersection with garish green dots and nobody knew why. Then they were seen pushing yellow parklets on to the sidewalk. Shortly after that, they had to make way for large boulders. The result was that many parking spots disappeared – unfortunately, the protests did not. Huge sums of money have been spent in recent years. But there's still no sign of the neighborhood of the future.

Today, cyclists ride back and forth on one side of the street, while cars have one lane in one direction. In the middle of one section of the street, there are several chairs, each surrounded by flower boxes covered in graffiti. On this particular summer day, three British tourists are sitting there, drinking beer and looking at the withered potted plants. They think it's cool and unusual to be able to sit in the middle of the street and watch everything just pass by. "Because it looks so quaint, but also unfinished," says one of the tourists, sipping his beer.

That's it. There's no better way to encapsulate Bergmannstrasse: "Quaint and unfinished" is exactly what Berlin's favorite street is. For years, it's been forced to endure one new beginning after the next. Nobody seems to have figured out which path is the right one to take, and whether or not a forest of signs and restrictions will lead to success, or whether it would be better to just backpedal in an attempt to appease the heated tempers on both sides.

One could also look at things from a positive point of view, however, and argue that the Bergmannkiez is a melting pot destined to perpetually pull something new out of its hat. This approach sheds a sympathetic light on the neighborhood. In this sense, it stands for the rest of the capital, that is, for diversity with a cosmopolitan and international flair, but also for an approach that can be provincial and not always straightforward. Come to think of it, that's Berlin.

Anne-Kattrin Palmer covers national politics for the daily *Berliner Zeitung*.

Espionage acts

The Stasi continues to transfix our collective imaginations | By Dan Fesperman

For an agency that lived for a mere forty years, and, while doing so, existed mostly in the shadows, the Stasi – or East Germany's Ministry for State Security – remains a vivid presence in the public imagination of the West, more than thirty-two years after its disintegration.

Just in the past several months, yet another new wave of Stasi dramas crept onto our book shelves and television screens. Published in quick succession were well-received American novels by Paul Vidich (*The Matchmaker*), Joseph Kanon (*The Berlin Exchange*) and by this writer (*Winter Work*). In late August, Netflix released *Kleo*, a German TV series about a Stasi assassin.

One reason for this enduring interest is the same as for earlier Stasi books and films – a morbid fascination with a society that so busily and dutifully informed on itself. How can any writer not be tempted by the stories contained in all of those Stasi files and dossiers, with their rich trove of personal betrayal by teachers, loved ones, co-workers and clergymen. *Stasiland*, Anna Funder's 2002 non-fiction book, and *The Lives of Others,* the Oscar-winning 2006 film, are still the exemplars for this vein of interest.

But with this year's offerings we've seen a deepening fascination with the Stasi's foreign intelligence branch, or HVA (Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung). One could date the beginning of this trend to 2015, with the airing of the German TV series *Deutschland 83*. Now that it's catching on more, it's likely to endure a while longer.

For starters, the Cold War feels more relevant than ever. Blame Vladimir Putin. By ordering the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, Putin re-energized the East-West standoff to its greatest level of tension since the Berlin Wall came down.

That has made the time ripe to look back on the era when public interest in spying reached its zenith, and in any re-examination of Cold War espionage it quickly becomes clear that East Germany was the mouse that roared. The HVA's well-documented penetrations of the corridors of West German power in Bonn, and of NATO headquarters in Brussels, are enticing to any writer attracted to plucky underdogs. Stasi spies also offer the moral complexity of characters seeking to do good even as they serve amoral masters like Stasi Minister Erich Mielke, who were willing to cross any line.

Of course, the HVA arguably had an unfair advantage as it worked in cities like Bonn and Brussels. Those were capitals of open societies where free expression was encouraged, and the residents weren't reporting on each other as a matter of state policy.

Nonetheless, the achievement of HVA spymaster Markus Wolf in building a formidable agency from the humblest of beginnings was, as I wrote in *Winter Work*, "a bit like taking a crystal radio kit and turning it into a massive signal tower, like the one the Americans used in Teufelsberg."

From my perspective as a novelist, it's easy to see a few additional reasons why the espionage side of the Stasi is likely to keep attracting creative interest.

One is the remarkable – and surprisingly meek – manner of the Stasi's demise. In effect, its 91,000 employees surrendered without a fight, capitulating to the same people they had so unceasingly scrutinized for the previous four decades. This happened even though Mielke had drawn up a menacing "Plan X" for fighting back. And, as anti-government protests rapidly gained momentum a month before the Wall came down, Mielke ordered the Stasi to activate this plan, which called for the mass arrest of nearly 86,000 East Germans.

PICTURE ALLIANCE / ROMAIN FELLENS

As Funder wrote in *Stasiland*, "The plans contained exact provisions for the use of all available prisons and camps, and when those were full for the conversion of other buildings: Nazi detention centers, schools, hospitals and factory holiday hostels. Every detail was foreseen, from where the doorbell was located on the house of each person to be arrested to the adequate supply of barbed wire and the rules of dress and etiquette in the camps."

Yet, when word went out to Stasi offices across the country to carry out this plan, Mielke's minions ignored him. Apparently, they wanted nothing to do with drawing popular anger down upon themselves, and that alone may have helped secure their future roles in popular fiction. It's much easier to warm up to antiheroes if you know that, ultimately, they'll refuse to obey the worst of their regime's orders.

But to my eye there is an even more powerful – and less obvious – reason why the Stasi's doings continue to offer such compelling material for novelists and screen writers. It, too, is related to Cold War nostalgia, but more for the idea of how unthreatening those spy-versus-spy machinations can now seem with regard to our personal security and privacy.

Let's face it: even in the espionage capital of Berlin, most people almost never encountered any actual foreign spies in those days, because that's how the business of spying worked. It was a competition of the few designed to avoid the attention of the many, and if you weren't a part of their milieu, then they almost certainly wanted nothing to do with you.

Today, every time you click on a website prompt to accept cookies, you're agreeing to let far more curious entities than spies into your home, and perhaps even into your thoughts about politics, your lifestyle, your reading habits or your consumer preferences. In places like China, merely deciding which website to visit can be fraught with sinister consequences, assuming you're even able to visit a site that the government doesn't want you to see.

My fictional version of Markus Wolf seems to foresee this sort of threat when he is discussing the future of his profession with an American counterpart in a latter chapter of *Winter Work*. Wolf, after remarking on some of the dazzling new surveillance technologies that he's heard will soon be available, says: "Before long an office clerk in Shanghai will have more power to pry into your personal affairs than our ministry does today. Once that comes to pass, why even bother with a million informants?"

Speaking for myself, I'll confess to a final, less cerebral reason why the Stasi is likely to keep showing up in our books and shows: the allure of Berlin. In a recent online conversation with author Joseph Kanon, while we were promoting our latest novels, we each confessed to this weakness, and I am certain it holds true for many writers. Ask them for their favorite setting, and that's the city they'll often choose. From John le Carré onward, Berlin has offered writers a haunted landscape painted in infinite shades of gray, a vibrant city built atop its own ruins, and its own deep well of dark history. It is a combination too compelling to ignore – "spying's most storied theme park," as I wrote in *Winter Work*.

As a bonus to all similarly afflicted scribblers, many of the Stasi's more important sites remain almost perfectly preserved, which is a tremendous help to our research. The grim and imposing headquarters complex is now home to the outstanding Stasi Museum. At the chilly and echoing corridors of the Stasi's most infamous prison, Hohenschönhausen, you can take a tour led by former inmates. And the more enterprising can venture north of the city to stroll the grounds of the complex of villas at Waldsiedlung Wandlitz, where East Germany's ruling elites (including Mielke) once lived. With a little more initiative you can even figure out which A-frame dacha once belonged to Markus Wolf along the wooded shoreline of the Bauersee, near the Brandenburg village of Prenden.

Given the richness of all this material, you're bound to keep seeing more novels featuring the Stasi, and probably more films and television shows as well.

Dan Fesperman is a former foreign correspondent for the *Baltimore Sun* and the author of thirteen critically acclaimed novels. His most recent novel is *Winter Work* (Knopf, 2022), a Stasi thriller set in Berlin as the East German regime disintegrates.

Lotte Laserstein: *Abend über Potsdam* (Evening over Potsdam), 1930

Mies en scène

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's revamped Neue Nationalgalerie is ready for its close-up | By Nadine Söll

Shiny and renewed: the *Neue Nationalgalerie*

Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie is both a Berlin icon and a temple of Western modernism. Since opening in 1968, the glass hall with its seemingly floating roof has been a highlight of countless visitors' trips to the German capital. In 2021, after a six-year renovation and modernization process under the watchful eye of David Chipperfield, the building once again opened its doors to the public. With a new iteration of the permanent collection and a comprehensive side program that includes music, dance and artistic interventions, the revamped structure remains entirely devoted to Mies' idea of a building that facilitates the meeting of art with society.

Thanks to his minimalist style and pared-down "skin and bones" architecture, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe is considered to have been a visionary and pioneer of modernism. Born in 1886 in Aachen, a city in the far west of Germany, his oeuvre revolved from the very beginning around the complex idea of bringing simplicity and perfection into harmony.

Mies' design for the Neue Nationalgalerie was based on an earlier sketch – one he'd originally created for the headquarters of the manufacturer of Bacardi rum in Cuba – which he'd simply dusted off and given to the Berlin Senate after noticing the tight-fisted nature of the fee they had offered. In keeping with his idea of merging the simple with the perfect, the structure is inspired by classical temples and their essential of forum, columns and roof – with one difference: the eight free-standing columns of the Neue Nationalgalerie become 10 cm narrower towards the top, thus imitating their classical forebears while simultaneously embracing radical modernity in their execution and materials. The steel roof that rests on these steel columns weighs several tons and is fastened by a kind of ball-and-socket joint, which only serves to reinforce the dreamlike impression of a floating structure.

The key idea behind the concept reveals the radical design principle Mies had already been pursuing since the 1920s, namely to create an open space with as few supports as possible and one in which the interior and exterior blend seamlessly into one another. In this spirit, one of the structure's fundamental elements is a continuous grid that runs through the building in the form of the identical floor slabs of the exhibition hall and terrace, in the roof structure and in the floor-to-ceiling windows that reach all around it. This *grid* – which can also be seen in the line of granite slabs that moves uninterrupted from the forecourt through the hall and on to the opposite side of the piazza – allows for the merging of interior and exterior, of the museum and its urban surroundings.

In this spirit, Mies' proposal for an optimal visitor's route through the building leads out of the daylight of the city, up the steps and over the forecourt into the light-flooded hall, which accentuates the transparency of the space and the union of outside and inside. The path subsequently leads down into the artificial light and typical white-cube design of the 1960s exhibition spaces on the underground floor. At the end of the path, the visitor steps back into the daylight of the sculpture garden – an unrivaled highlight inspired by the walk-through garden terrace at the MoMA in New York.

Mies designed the garden of the Neue Nationalgalerie as a deliberate extension of the museum space. Separated by high walls, this garden enables a harmonious interplay of sculpture, water basins and plants, including the silver maple and Gleditsia Mies handpicked in the neighboring Tiergarten. For many years, public access to the garden was closed for safety reasons, as several tree roots had pushed the floor slabs upwards, making them tripping hazards, but also because the open doors had a negative effect on the museum's indoor climate. In the course of the recent renovation, the garden monument has now been fully restored and reopened to the public.

The task of renovating and modernizing the Neue Nationalgalerie was entrusted to David Chipperfield, himself a superstar in international architecture. Not only is he the man responsible for carrying out the renovation of the Neues Museum on Berlin's Museum Island, he also more recently headed up the expansion of the new entrance to that museum and the James Simon Galerie. Chipperfield's intention was to preserve "as much Mies as possible." In other words, despite making interventions in the structure, the original aesthetic and materials were to be preserved wherever possible.

> MIES' PROPOSAL FOR AN OPTIMAL VISITOR'S ROUTE THROUGH THE BUILDING LEADS OUT OF THE DAYLIGHT OF THE CITY, UP THE STEPS AND OVER THE FORECOURT INTO THE LIGHT-FLOODED HALL, WHICH ACCENTUATES THE TRANSPARENCY OF THE SPACE AND THE UNION OF OUTSIDE AND INSIDE.

Almost five decades after its initial launch in 1968, the building and its interior furnishings were getting on in years; indeed, both time and millions of art lovers had left their decidedly non-aesthetic mark on the museum. And now, after six years of elaborate planning and renovation (2015–2020), the Neue Nationalgalerie has been accessible again since August 2021.

This guiding principle was almost entirely possible to achieve in the upper hall. Only in isolated cases did the steel and roof structure need to be restored – in certain sections by hand – and repaired with matte black paint. All 160 glass windows were replaced and each granite floor slab was first cataloged, then removed, cleaned and reinstalled in its original spot in the grid. In addition to the granite and marble, it is the warm wood tones of the coat check area that set the tone for the aesthetic of the hall, and this was also carried over for the newly created checkrooms and service areas in the subterranean area.

Chipperfield's deep reverence for the original structure prompted some critics in German feuilletons to inquire as to where exactly they should look to even find the results of the renovation they were supposed to critique. The answer, of course, is to take an even closer look – especially behind the scenes. The building's most serious deficiencies had been in its material and technology, both of which Chipperfield updated and adapted for contemporary use, including the refurbishment of the concrete and the installment of air conditioning and preventive fire protection. In the same context, an exterior ramp for barrier-free access and a new elevator were added. The depot, checkroom area and museum store were also reorganized.

In the process, a total of more than 35,000 objects were dismantled, given ID tags and then logged and processed in a disassembly database of sorts. The windows, for example, had always been a major source of concern at the Neue Nationalgalerie. As early as in its first year, there had already been a heated exchange of letters between the museum and Mies' office in Chicago concerning the problems associated with condensation on the panes caused by fluctuations in ambient conditions. After the museum solved the problem by soaking up the condensation with blankets, the elderly architect replied that if the blankets were not removed immediately, he himself would travel to Berlin and personally throw them onto the street. Today, the problem is kept under control by an intelligent air-conditioning system that allows the windows to remain clear and uncovered – Mies would be pleased.

The tremendous weight on the façade had also led many of the glass panes to break repeatedly over the course of the years, so that at the time of the renovation, only five of the original windows remained in the building. Since the 1980s, due to new production methods, it had only been possible to replace the oversized glass panes – each of which is 3.4m x 5.40 m and weighs 1.2 tons – in sections. As part of Chipperfield's overhaul, all 200 panes were renewed; each had to have its own unique dimensions because the steel frames that surrounded the glass had warped over the years. One of the biggest challenges with the panes was that their unusually extensive width meant that only one company in the world – a manufacturer in China – was able to supply the desired laminated safety glass. It was a logistical tour de force.

Sascha Wiederhold: *Bögenschützen* (Archers), 1928

The Neue Nationalgalerie remains a unique structure in the world and in many ways represents a gift from Mies to Berlin. The building was erected between 1965 and 1968 and stands like no other for the pioneering spirit of postwar West Berlin. The impressive glass-and-steel structure functions as a "modern temple" next to the ensemble of structures that comprise the Kulturforum at Potsdamer Platz and Hans Sharoun's Philharmonie and Staatsbibliothek. As the West Berlin counterpart to Museum Island in the historical center to the east, the area is home to some of the city's most important cultural institutions and marks the site's status as a "utopia built from ruins."

This visionary spirit is also evident in the permanent collection on display at the Neue Nationalgalerie. It traces the path, transformation and impact of 20th century art in East and West Germany – and ultimately reunites them. The selection and juxtaposition of the works also marks a contemporary exploration of feminist and post-colonial criticism. With the help of a number of artworks on loan – as well as through accompanying literature focusing on museum education – the program reflects on historical omissions and oversights while displaying work by female artists and that stemming from non-European contexts.

The current presentation of the permanent collection, "Die Kunst der Gesellschaft" (The Art of Society), dispenses altogether with any kind of strict chronology; instead, it outlines the spectrum of isms spanning the first half of the last century, namely Cubism, Expressionism and Dadaism, under the heading of classical modernism. The common narrative thread is the juxtaposition of Realism and Abstraction. Early on in the visitor's tour of the space, two of the most recent acquisitions flank the entrance to the central "American Room." One of them – a melancholic evening scene by Lotte Laserstein – represents Realism, while on the opposite side, a work by Sascha Wiederhold stands for a variety of abstractions, combined in this case with folkloristic and spiritual influences, as well as other arts such as theater and film. A relatively unknown yet quite remarkable artist, Wiederhold currently has a solo exhibition presented and housed by the Neue Nationalgalerie until January of next year.

Nadine Söll is an art historian based in Berlin. Her research explores contemporary art and music cultures. Her fields of interest include the relationship between art and society and the power of art to foster communication processes and cultural encounters.

BPK / NATIONALGALERIE, SMB

Summer on the outskirts: the Liebermann Villa on Lake Wannsee

I promised you a rose garden

Long overdue: Berlin finally embraces its greatest painter, Max Liebermann | By Nicole Bröhan

Perennials bursting with color, roses in full bloom, birch trees rustling in the wind. Sailboats gliding across the sparkling water, sunrays dancing on the lake, waves licking at the shore.

Max Liebermann's world on the shores of Berlin's Wannsee is an idyll. Located beyond the hustle and bustle of the big city, the painter's oasis has won international renown in large part due to his series of garden paintings. It's hard to believe that it wasn't until 2006 – and thanks to the persistence of committed citizens – that the painter's villa, which had been expropriated by the Nazis and then used as a hospital and later as a diving club, could finally be recognized as the cultural treasure it is.

Max Liebermann (1847–1935), Berlin's best-known and probably most important painter, was at the height of his artistic career and social standing when he bought the rural piece of property alongside the Großer Wannsee in 1909, fulfilling his lifelong dream of having a country estate with a garden. Proudly claiming that he had purchased the property "with his own hands," the 62-year-old accomplished artist finally had a summer retreat after years of battling hostilities and various disputes throughout his career. However, the truth is that Liebermann could have afforded a summer house even without achieving commercial success with his art.

Max Liebermann was born in Berlin in 1847 as the third child of a wealthy, observant Jewish merchant family with origins in the cotton fabric industry. In his case, there is no known epiphany or *coup de foudre* that drove him to become a painter. It was instead his sharp powers of observation and personal experience that compelled him to begin drawing at the age of 10, seeking to put what he saw around him onto paper. This led to an "intense love of painting," he later claimed, which was nourished by private lessons and, in defiance of his father's wishes, ultimately resulted in training at the art academy in Weimar.

Clearly impacted by his father's strict parenting, the young painter developed a concept of art in which truth and a lack of affectation are conveyed by the poignancy of basic humanity. Decency, virtue and real life distinguish the poor. Manners, luxury and extravagance, on the other hand, are markers of the rich. It almost seems as if Liebermann, through the medium of art, sought to continue the social commitment demonstrated by his philanthropically inclined merchant father and grandfather.

Despite the familial pressures to which he was subject, Liebermann was in no hurry to achieve success with his art. It was not until 1872 in Hamburg, three years into his studies and following a trip to Holland, that he first caused a stir with *Women Plucking Geese*, an unflinching portrait of women at work plucking the feathers of slaughtered geese. It took several more decades before he would gain fame and glory in his native Berlin.

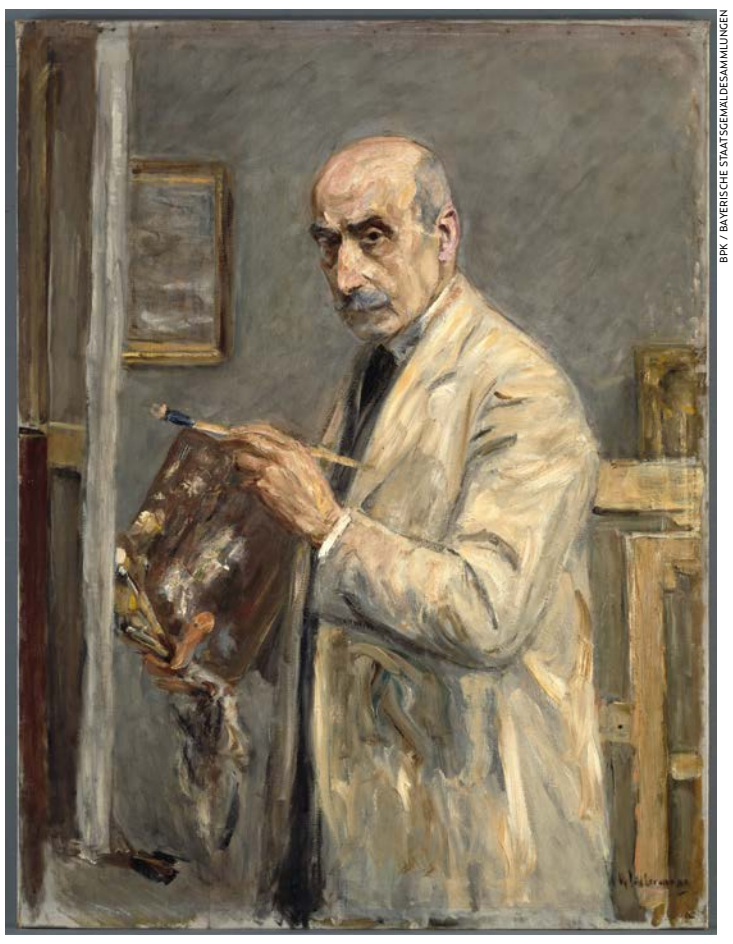
His paintings of "simple" people doing menial tasks – the modern naturalist motifs of his choice – proved controversial, spawning outrage. Referring to his work as "poor people's portraiture," art critics branded him the "apostle of ugliness." As harsh as such statements may have been, they were also an indication that his work was drawing attention. And people were actually buying his supposedly "base" paintings.

Confident in his talent, the young painter ignored his critics, continuing with his dauntless study of dignity in which he depicted the monotony and brutality of hard physical labor dispassionately and without condescension. He drew his inspiration not from Berlin, Paris or Barbizon, but from the Netherlands. It was there that he found his artistic home, within a liberal, tolerant and seemingly classless society of people tending to their work. Intrigued by Dutch 17th-century painting, Liebermann was also fascinated by the region's landscape and, above all, the social conditions he observed there through his regular summer visits to the coast until 1913. Without exception, his masterpieces of the 1870s and 1880s, as studies of peasants and craftsmen at work, depict subjects he often discovered purely by chance, in passing. They include paintings of a cobbler's workshop, women making preserves, orphanages and old men's homes, as well as women mending nets and bleaching linen.

After spending 15 years in the artists' capitals of Paris and Munich, Liebermann returned to Berlin in 1884, where he married Martha Marckwald. One year later, the couple welcomed their only child, Käthe. The frenetic pace of life in a rapidly industrializing metropolis with its soaring volume of traffic seemed to have little appeal to him as an artist. He remained faithful to his usual range of themes, eschewed urban realism and never adopted the city of Berlin as a subject to explore.

After 1890, we see a gradual change take place in Liebermann's work. Slowly but surely, his style began to shift away from Naturalism and toward so-called Impressionism, which is a rather vague term for a variety of styles. Increasingly, fishermen, farmers and artisans disappeared from his paintings and were replaced by people riding horses on the beach, spa guests and vacationers. Later in his career, Liebermann preferred to paint scenes and landscapes featuring small figures on the move as well as landscapes without any figures at all. He developed a growing interest in portraiture, which acquired considerable importance in his later work.

This change in subject matter was accompanied by a stylistic turn away from his brown-in-brown color palette and toward an infusion of light. Sweeping, thick layers of color on color applied by his loose, free brushwork combine to create a brighter palette of colors in which the impression of reflecting light brings sparkle and life to the scenes depicted.



BPK / BAYERISCHE STAATSGEMÄLDESAMMLUNGEN

Self-portrait of an artist as a grown man: Max Liebermann

Like the Berlin art world in which he was firmly anchored, Liebermann was caught up in the euphoria of changes underway in 1890s Germany. The tensions between Germany's liberal bourgeoisie and Kaiser Wilhelm II's autocratic hold on power continued to leave their mark on Liebermann, whose delayed claim to fame in Berlin was due in no small part to the monarch, who scornfully rejected his work as "art from the gutter."

Max Liebermann, whose family background and inheritance relieved him of any financial worries, moved into his parents' estate on Pariser Platz in 1892. Located near the Brandenburg Gate, the residence marked one of Berlin's top addresses. Avoiding affectations of wealth, neither his lifestyle nor his artistic approach gave any hint of his privilege. Nonetheless, there appears to have been a connection between his financial independence and his shift from Naturalism to Impressionism, as well as his move away from rather weighty subjects to those of a more relaxed and lighthearted lifestyle.

Increasingly during these years, the painter turned his back to the prevailing traditions of Wilhelmine Germany. As co-founder of the Berlin Secession (1898) – and its first president – he was an ardent champion of individual creative freedom. His determination in this regard made him a popular symbol of a bourgeoisie struggling to achieve cultural independence and rebelling against a conservative art world bound by convention.

Liebermann's Wannsee villa, which he referred to as his "lakeside palace," became his retreat from the city, a place where, in contrast to the Pariser Platz townhouse, the aging painter could relax and reflect on the world around him. By this point, he had won considerable notoriety as an artist, receiving several awards on his 65th and 70th birthdays. In 1920, he became president of the Prussian Academy of Arts, where he began to devote more time to life as a cultural politician than painter, presumably following his own advice that it's not enough to become famous once in a lifetime – one has to become famous several times.

When asked why, of all artists, a Jewish artist had to paint a portrait of President Paul Hindenburg, Liebermann replied with, "I'm just a painter, and what does painting have to do with Judaism?" Though not an adherent to orthodox Jewish traditions, Liebermann never denied his cultural and religious roots. After 1933, the social lives of Max and Martha Liebermann – who for decades had held a prominent position in Berlin society – grew increasingly still. Depressed by the fact that maintaining personal contact with him and his wife had become dangerous for those in his social and professional circles, the painter began to withdraw into a state of "inner immigration."

On Feb. 8, 1935, at the age of 87, Max Liebermann died in his family home on Pariser Platz. "For those in power," commented a contemporary art critic, his death was "a timely event, as his existence served as a form of criticism." Although news of the famous painter's death spread quickly, the Berlin public took little note of his passing. Shamefully few friends and colleagues attended his funeral service, which had been deemed a "forbidden" gathering by the Gestapo.

Today, much is done to maintain and protect the legacy of Max Liebermann and his work, both at his family home and the villa, where he created his art. His importance to the city and the art world more broadly have long since been acknowledged. The Wannsee villa's lush garden of shrubs, trees, multicolored blooming borders and vegetables creates a unique ambience the artist himself would have been proud of.

Nicole Bröhan's celebrated biography of Max Liebermann was published in 2012.

In the land of poets and thinkers – of yesteryear

Two teachers from Berlin set out to explore the world of education and discover how Germany has lost its way | By Clara Schaksmeier and Alexander Brand

Do you remember the sound of your old school bell at recess? The smell of the hallway, the color of your classroom walls? The teacher's desk stood in front of the chalkboard; the students' benches were in the back. Our memories of classroom setups are all fairly similar. For a long time, we, too, only knew of our own school experiences – until we made the switch from student to teacher and found ourselves on a journey to classrooms around the world.

When we enter a Berlin classroom today, at first glance, the basic setup remains the same: the blackboard and the teacher's desk are in front; the students' benches are in the back. In the past few years, the chalkboard may have been replaced by a smartboard, sluggishly moving the German education system into the 21st century. The system's rigid nature is also reflected in the structures of the teaching profession as a whole. Teacher shortages, lack of collaboration and high workloads deprive educators of opportunities for exchange, further development and the space to broaden their horizons.

It was our desire for a broader perspective – which we struggled to find in the German school system – that drove us to go abroad. Armed with curiosity and the financial support of several scholarship programs, Clara gained teaching experience in Canada, Vietnam, India and Georgia, while Alexander – eager to see how high-performing education systems achieved their results – spent five months visiting schools in Finland, Estonia, Japan and Singapore.

In India, Clara worked closely with Kavita, a biology teacher and curriculum coordinator. Kavita is not only passionate about her subject, but also has an open ear for her students. Some days, after school, a long queue of young people stretches in front of her office, filled with students asking her for help of any kind. You can often find Kavita talking to her charges after work, listening to them, advising them and sometimes even accompanying them outside of school.

And then there's Ms. Nguyen, a German teacher from Ho Chi Minh City, who is committed to her interactive and progressive didactic approach. She independently educates herself in the afternoon and on weekends with books and websites to break away from the classic lecture approach most frequently applied at her school. She strives to make her class as exciting as possible, and as a result, her lessons are the highlight of the week for many of her students. She willingly shares her knowledge of interactive teaching methods with her colleagues and is currently developing a compendium of methods on her own initiative.

All over the world, there are teachers who do their job with the greatest passion and dedication, who love to be of service to their students, and who are deeply committed to them. They are driven by the knowledge that they are having a positive impact on the lives of young people. It is through these teachers that the system's vulnerabilities are defied.

Learning about other school systems can reveal our own system's strengths and shortcomings. At times, other countries' strengths highlighted Germany's long-diagnosed weaknesses. In Finland, the teaching profession is so popular that training programs are flooded with applicants and can cherry-pick the best. In Estonia, technology has found its way into every classroom. Every school employs an educational technologist who manages the hardware and provides training for teachers. Meanwhile, most schools in Germany consider a staff IT specialist a luxury. For decades, the Estonian government has prioritized equipping its entire society with digital skills, so teachers of all ages are comfortable integrating technology into their lessons.

Being abroad also challenged our perceptions of what school can be. Hanna, an Estonian teenager who had spent a year studying in a German high school, reported that her strangest experience there was how once the lessons of the day had concluded, everyone headed home. In Estonia, school was where she met up with friends in the afternoon, organized clubs and enjoyed a game of table tennis. School was her second home.

On a policy level as well, looking abroad can reveal how the German education system lags behind in ways rarely discussed in the media. The Singaporean government recognized that the skill of teaching is so complex that teachers need lifelong support for professional learning. Teachers there have significantly smaller teaching loads compared to those in Germany and spend one hundred hours a year on professional development. They meet weekly in professional learning teams to collaborate on lesson planning, reflect on their teaching and discuss pedagogy. Spending time in a school system that genuinely invests in teachers highlighted how our system does not.

At the same time, our encounters with systems from around the world made us appreciate some aspects of our system we had taken for granted.

In Japan and Singapore, admission to one of the few prestigious universities takes on anxiety-inducing significance in students' lives. Consequently, the pressure to perform academically dominates the school system. While German students certainly face societal pressure to attend *Gymnasium*, the school track with the quickest path to university, Germany does not have an equivalent of an Ivy League. Instead, resources for higher education are spread equally across the country. Germany's dual vocational training system, with its interlinking of theoretical and practical learning, is also a model for many countries.

And it's not just countries in the Global South that struggle with low teacher wages. Many Estonian teachers also work overtime to compensate for their inadequate wages. Kaarel, a teacher close to retirement age, confessed that he would have to continue working for the foreseeable future and that teachers over 70 years old are no exception. When young teachers enter the profession in Estonia, often without proper training, they tend to leave fairly quickly for a more lucrative career. There are several steps we need to take in Germany to make the teaching profession more attractive. Fortunately, increasing pay is not one of them.

Curious teachers who spend time abroad will bring a treasure chest of inspiration back home with them. When we enter our classrooms in Germany today, the school bell and furniture have stayed the same. But we have not. We have returned with new ideas, a different perspective and an appreciation of things formerly unnoticed. We no longer see only the system's flaws, but also the potential that lies within it.

Clara Schaksmeier is an educator who works with urban communities in Berlin. Her non-fiction children's book *So lernt die Welt* (This is how the world learns) is forthcoming with Knesebeck Verlag.

Alexander Brand is a math and science educator in Hamburg who speaks and writes about his experience with high-performing education systems.

PICTURE ALLIANCE / MEDIA PRESS

I'm a celebrity, get me out of here: American actor Harrison Ford looking puzzled on the German TV show *Wetten, dass..?* in 2013.

Ze Germans & their wacky TV antics

A spectacle known as *Wetten, dass..?* serves as a litmus test for determining one's familiarity with – and affection for – a particular archetype in German culture

By J.J. Hagedorn

The city of Friedrichshafen couldn't be further away from Berlin if it tried. Located on the shores of Lake Constance in the southwestern state of Baden-Württemberg near Germany's borders with Austria and Switzerland, the city is literally at the opposite end of the country from the capital in the north.

This geographical distance lends itself well to an examination of another distance within the country, one of a more psychological nature that will be on brilliant display on Nov. 19, when Friedrichshafen hosts the TV show that divides the German-speaking world like no other. On that evening, the cities of Berlin and Friedrichshafen will unwittingly represent two opposing poles on a spectrum of cultural experience that ranges from genuine veneration to deep repulsion.

The show in question is a wacky television extravaganza known as *Wetten, dass..?*, which can be loosely translated as "Do you want to bet that..?" It is both a much-loved and much-mocked remnant of what many thought – and some hoped – was a bygone era in German entertainment. Broadcast live for a whopping four hours on a publicly funded channel with no commercials, it can be described as an old-fashioned variety game show interspersed with appearances by national and international celebrities and music acts, all of whom are invited by a blowhard German host to perform and then make small talk on an oversized couch while betting on whether pre-selected contestants on an adjacent stage will succeed in achieving whatever strange feat they claim to be able to pull off, which in the last show included such things as identifying songs played in a toilet using only a toilet brush and snatching Frisbees out of the air with the slow-snapping jaws of an excavator.

On any given night in the decades-long history of this intermittent road show, viewers might have been treated to performances by Johnny Cash, Take That, Michael Jackson, Madonna, and other international stars. One show in 2012 featured individual live performances by Pink, Alicia Keys and Rihanna – three music industry giants on one night. But viewers could also expect to watch Hugh Jackman fish Germany's defense minister – a barefooted Ursula von der Leyen – out of a garbage bin. Or Tom Hanks wearing a bunny hat and getting a manicure. Or Gerald Butler delighting over a young man able to crack walnuts with his rear end.

Indeed, *Wetten, dass..?* is a well-known source of trauma for English-speaking celebrities. After his appearance, a very nonplussed Tom Hanks said: "In the United States, if you are on a TV show that goes for four hours, everybody responsible for that show is fired the next day." And when asked about his own experience on the show, actor Will Arnett bemoaned the "constant stop-start" of the simultaneous translation, noting: "They were trying to give me a nervous breakdown. And it worked."

As you might have noticed, dear reader, trying to describe *Wetten, dass..?* is like trying to explain a joke. It's a thankless endeavor that has no chance of living up to the madcap experience of the original. The only thing a person can say with confidence is "you have to see it to believe it." And, at this point, the only thing readers unfamiliar with the show need to know is that it is a marker of what some refer to as *Kartoffel* culture.

The German word for potato, Kartoffel, an originally pejorative term used to describe ethnic Germans, draws on the same food-based slurs that German speakers have themselves used to designate groups of foreigners. Today, many young people use the term in multi-ethnic contexts as a humorous way to designate each other. A person can certainly take umbrage at the use of the term Kartoffel – and there is definitely a discussion to be had on the bandying about of such terms – but there can be no doubt that the designation, when used in a playful spirit to describe a person and a culture that is stereotypically German, applies 100 percent to *Wetten, dass..?* It doesn't get any more Kartoffel than this show.

Perhaps it's also important for readers to know that the most recent *Wetten, dass..?* broadcast garnered a whopping 14 million viewers and 45 percent market share in Germany. This makes it one of the country's last remaining water cooler topics – those conversations people would have while gathered around the water cooler at work, often about the TV shows they'd seen that weekend, back in the golden era of broadcast television, when there were only a few channels to choose from.

As previous critics have pointed out, with such a large viewership, there's a tendency to grant *Wetten, dass..?* some sort of deeper cultural meaning. It has switched out a variety of hosts, broadcast on-stage tragedies and been left for dead on many occasions, only to come roaring back. And it's true: Whether people like it or not, there's no denying that *Wetten, dass..?* is a formative part of the contemporary German-speaking cultural experience. Still, the show is not particularly meaningful in and of itself, nor does it in any way reflect the *current state* of German-speaking culture. On the contrary, it inhabits a universe entirely of its own. Unlike more demanding TV shows, it asks very little of its viewers other than they sit back and let themselves be entertained.

Unfortunately, for many, this is often difficult, given the blatant sexism, racism and tone-deafness that routinely plague the show. The mere mention of it's name has been known to inspire vigorous head-shaking, eye-rolling and groans of discomfort among many viewers. Still, there's a good chance you'll find even these individuals sitting on their couches on Saturday night watching the show live on TV. After its most recent comeback in November 2021, Hamburg-based comedian Hinnerk Köhn noted: "I guess it's part of Germany's cultural heritage and all, but let's face it, you have to be drunk to get through it." It's precisely this fine line between entertaining and unpredictable appearances, on the one hand, and absolutely cringe-worthy, OK-boomer antics on the other that makes it impossible for most people to look away.

> IN FACT, THE SHOW'S MOST RECENT BROADCAST, IN NOVEMBER 2021, WAS UNIVERSALLY HERALDED AS *ONLY INTERMITTENTLY CRINGE*.

So where do you, dear reader, figure on this spectrum between the two psychological poles of Berlin and Friedrichshafen? It takes only a couple questions to find out. These questions can be asked of individuals of all ages, races and citizenships.

The key question is: Have you ever seen *Wetten, dass..?* ? If your answer is no, then you have the right to claim full non-Kartoffel (NoKa) status. Blissfully unaware of the existence of the show, you do not carry the burden of either loving or hating it. This is also to say, however, that your insight into Kartoffel culture is severely limited. You'll never enjoy the sweet memory of telling your friends at elementary school that your parents let you stay up to watch the whole show – the childhood equivalent of a water cooler brag. Conversely, you've also never known the joy of reminding your adult friends that the show provocatively toyed with black face as late as 2013. In other words, your level of familiarity with Kartoffel culture is, by definition, very low, and your affection for stereotypical German behavior has yet to be fully tested.

If your answer to the question is yes, and if you can't remember ever *not* knowing of the show's existence, then you automatically qualify for full Kartoffel (FuKa) status. Basically, if you saw the show at any point in your childhood and spoke enough German to understand what was going on, then you have a high level of familiarity with the stereotypical behavior of German speakers. Of course, what you do with this status is completely up to you. You might enjoy the entertainment of it all, but you might also choose to reject Kartoffel culture entirely for the manner in which it makes you, the viewer, complicit in fostering a system of subcutaneous racism and sexism. Which brings us to the next group.

If you've watched *Wetten, dass..?* in its entirety – whether from a young age or as an adult – and you dislike it for everything it represents, then congratulations, you're a member of AntiKa! This group includes German speakers, non-German-speakers and self-hating Kartoffeln. If everything you find annoying about Germany is reflected in the self-satisfied posture of the hosts, guests and themes of *Wetten, dass..?*, and if the word you most often use to describe the show is *Fremdschämen* (a feeling of shame for the actions of others), then you're AntiKa. Your familiarity with Kartoffel culture qualifies as high, but there is zero love lost and you're only capable of hate-watching the show.

And, finally, we come to the odd category of outsiders who've watched *Wetten, dass..?* for the first time as adults and still don't know what to think – or perhaps what they're allowed to think – about it. As foreigners and/or non-German-speakers, these people have no horse in the race and fall into the category of Kartoffel-curious (KaCu). More often than not, when KaCus witness the spectacle, they watch it with concern, horror and discomfort. "Infinitely weird," is the way one KaCu friend described it, shaking their head and asking "what drugs are these people on?" This sentiment is often echoed by performers on the show themselves, for example, Michael Bublé, who once insisted that "if I'd known the show was this weird, I would have smoked some weed first."

Still, many KaCus have enough distance to experience fascination for the spectacle. They are in the privileged position of watching *Wetten, dass..?* as an anthropological experiment. They know that as a foreigner or a foreign-born resident, they could be accused of lacking cultural awareness and understanding if they express any disapproval of the program. It's hard to know what KaCus really think, as they possess greater familiarity with the program than do NoKas but have yet to move to the AntiKa camp. Instead, they are open to watching it – often ironically – with their German-speaking friends.

And then there's the extent to which some KaCus genuinely approve of the stereotypically German goings-on in the show. Their motives are perhaps best captured by Canadian-born comedian Daniel Ryan Spaulding, who calls such individuals "bratwurst babies." The term is yet another food-based classification, this time to describe a "bunch of German suck-ups" who've moved to Germany, usually from North America, and who don't want to hear any complaints or criticism about their adopted home. "What's so bizarre to me is that I expect this from Germans – after all, some Germans are just not aware of the matrix they're living in," Spaulding jibes. "But if you're from another country, you should know better."

But wait, there might actually be some movement in this realm. In fact, the show's most recent broadcast, in November 2021, was universally heralded as "only intermittently cringe." Is it possible that the Covid-19 pandemic tamed the beast that is *Wetten, dass..?* ? Much more likely is that the show was on its best behavior, eager to provide a brief respite from the multiple crises weighing on the German-speaking public and allowing them a brief glimpse of a simpler time, when the show still functioned as the "Lagerfeuer der Nation" – the nation's fireplace.

Wetten, dass..? is now scheduled to return for two more one-off shows, the one in Friedrichshafen in November 2022 and another in 2023 in an as yet undetermined city. Both evenings will provide us with an opportunity to take stock of our relationship to Kartoffel culture.

If you're a NoKa who hasn't seen it yet, tune in on Nov. 19 and make up your own mind. Just don't forget to stock up on alcoholic beverages first, otherwise you might not make it through. All FuKas, AntiKas, CuKas and even the bratwurst babies know that. And if there's one thing we can all agree on, as comedian Spaulding suggests, it's that "complaining about Germany is the most joyful part of living in Germany."

PICTURE ALLIANCE / DPA | JAN WOITAS

Hosts Thomas Gottschalk and Michelle Hunziker watch as a candidate from Darmstadt attempts to solve a Rubik's Cube within 4 minutes underwater with his eyes closed.

J. J. Hagedorn is an author living in Berlin.

How I learned to stop worrying and love German Unity Day

In real life, I've never actually attended a German Unity Day celebration. Probably because no one's ever invited me to join them in commemorating October 3rd, the national holiday marking the reunification of Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In recent years, however, I've celebrated the day on multiple occasions – in my own mind.

In general, I tend to develop an excessive degree of empathy for the characters in my novels. So when one of my leading ladies turned out to be a German diplomat, I knew it wouldn't be long before I started feeling German Unity Day in every fiber of my being. And, true to form, after weeks of preparing for the day, I had little strength left to actually celebrate it.

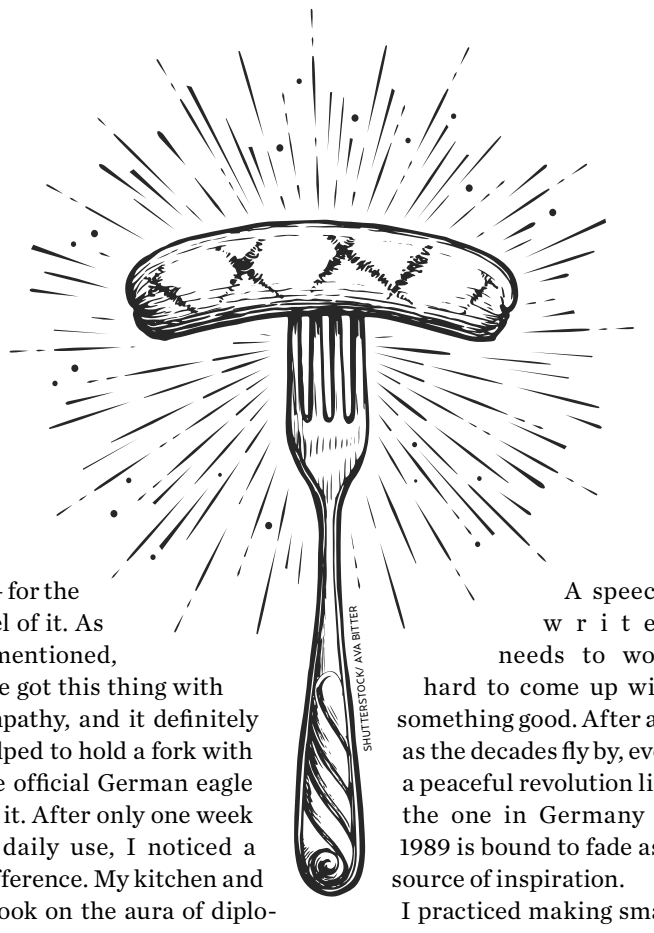
I'd been doing research for my novel for over two years, successfully internalizing everything I learned. I'd met German diplomats active in different parts of the world, and at some point in every conversation, one of them would say: "And then, of course, there's October 3rd." Every time these words were uttered, they were accompanied by a heavy, audible sigh.

It was a sigh that I, too, would soon start emitting. It became almost impossible to avoid. At one point, I was sure that I, too, was going to be consumed by German Unity Day.

It all began very gradually. The first indication of my fate came in the form of napkins – in Germany's national colors, of course – which I suddenly came to possess. Soon after that, I found myself listening to the German national anthem at home, even humming it in the shower. I also began sampling Bavarian beer, with the ultimate goal of determining which one qualified as the best brew. I achieved my goal but, ironically, it turned out that the best beer came from Franconia.

I ordered a dozen different Rieslings and bottles of Sekt from different wineries. I participated in online wine tasting sessions, taste-testing various bottles shipped to me beforehand, and learned a lot about slate soil and steep-slope vineyards. My ultimate pick was a winery on the Mosel River, which was said to be a favorite of Germany's current president. I still place orders with them to this day. Twice a year, several boxes are dropped off at my shabby Berlin entrance hall. And I can assure you that these fermented grapes in a bottle – now referred to in my circle of friends as the *Präsidentensekt* – are very popular and welcome gifts wherever they go.

I also ended up eating with only one fork, one with the German eagle on it. I got it somewhere, probably at some lunch in some embassy. Actually, I know very well when and where I acquired the fork, but I'm not going make that information public here. I feel slightly ashamed. But the fact is I needed it. I really needed it – for the feel of it. As I mentioned, I've got this thing with empathy, and it definitely helped to hold a fork with the official German eagle on it. After only one week of daily use, I noticed a difference. My kitchen and I took on the aura of diplomats. Plus, in my opinion, the fork looked really good on us.


SHUTTERSTOCK/ AVA BITTER

I wrote a speech. Probably my first and only speech commemorating German Unity Day. I never gave the speech, but I sat and worked on it for days.

Speeches commemorating annual occasions are the hardest to write. National holidays are the biggest challenge, because they mark the same event year after year. You have to write an entirely new and inspiring speech, preferably with never-heard-before lines, words no one will forget. A speechwriter needs to work hard to come up with something good. After all, as the decades fly by, even a peaceful revolution like the one in Germany in 1989 is bound to fade as a source of inspiration.

I practiced making small talk, the type you hear in every conversation at these kinds of celebrations. But practicing small talk during a pandemic was no easy feat. I strolled through my apartment, chatted with the doors, flirted with the standing lamps, always with a glass of *Präsidentensekt* in my hand. I wore my best dress and shiny shoes. What can I say? I was an excellent conversationalist, I was captivating. The only problem is that I didn't get any business cards. But, whatever. What's the point of all those cards anyway? Most of the time no one has any intention of actually calling the other person.

Next, I started a pages-long guest list of names. But, for budgetary reasons, I had to make repeated cuts to the list. In the end, only the important names were left, and I wasn't looking forward to seeing any of them.

Finally, it was time for the sausage. I'd been unaware of the significance of *Bratwurst* before I started my research. From Ankara to Montevideo, people at the embassies talked about German Bratwurst. And about the guests who came to German Unity Day celebrations for the sole purpose of eating the celebrated sausage.

For a time, I ate hardly anything else. I became an expert on the taste and consistency of Bratwurst, having found my Mecca in Berlin's Neukölln district at a store that still referred to itself as a butchery rather than a sausage boutique. Berlin has a knack of making you feel grateful for the simplest of things.

In the absence of a backyard, I set up the BBQ in my own apartment – in a kitchen without an exhaust fan. I learned a few things on that day, especially about the smoke detector in my building. My neighbors also learned a couple of things about me. I guess that's why I gave up – with a heavy heart – on my idea of setting up party tents in our back courtyard, even though I'd found some really nice tents in Germany's national red, black and gold colors. I imagined how lovely they would look in the backyard of my palatial residence. I could see it all right in front of me: a garden full of elegant tents, guests everywhere, each having made it onto the exclusive list, and each now joyfully downing their Bratwurst as a jazz singer sang the national anthem on a small stage as corks pop out of bottles of fermented grapes.

But there you have it. I'm not an ambassador in an elegant residence. I'm a writer in a two-room apartment in Kreuzberg. Still, looking back, I must say that I had a wonderful time here. I put on fabulous parties and became a magnificent hostess, if I do say so myself. Of course, it would've been even better if I'd actually received an invitation myself, at least once. After all, I don't go around handing out my business card, and I don't steal silverware, not even a single fork. I promise.

Lucy Fricke is a Berlin-based author whose critically acclaimed novel *Die Diplomatin* (The diplomat) was published by Claassen earlier this year. It depicts the fate of a German diplomat working in various cities, such as Montevideo and Istanbul, and grappling with a number of diplomatic tasks, including how to organize celebrations for German Unity Day on October 3rd.