

After the Wall: East Meets West in the New Berlin

By John Borneman

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Reviewed by Michael Klees

In the summer of 1991, American newspapers featured many somber articles on the anniversary of the Central and East European revolutions. Only a year earlier, these same newspapers had celebrated the victory of democracy over socialism. The German media, closer to the events, reflected an even dimmer picture, particularly with respect to the year-old unification of Germany. The short-lived joy and optimism gave way to the day-to-day business of coping with a collapsing economy and rising unemployment. Resentful comments about unannounced tax increases in West Germany—a theme familiar to the American voter—and the electoral decline in several *Länder* (state) elections of the Helmut Kohl's unification party, Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), are symptoms of a changing atmosphere.

In this environment of transformation, publication of any analysis that sheds light on the German reality is welcome. In an unusual introduction of one people to another, Dr. John Borneman, a professor of anthropology at the University of California at San Diego, employs "culture" as the medium for bringing American readers closer to East Germans. Through a series of cultural case studies in his book, *After the Wall: East Meets West in the New Berlin*, Borneman has "not attempted to capture the entire Berlin experience.... Rather [he chose] ...to convey the specificity and diversity of individual lives...to portray more their range and uniqueness than their typicality and universality" (p. 5). Borneman, who spent several years living and researching in Berlin, chose this city because "to Anglo-American eyes, the GDR [German Democratic Republic] has always seemed an archetype of the Leninist, totalitarian state" (p. 9). Therefore, "Berlin, in its divided state, was useful to all parties. The wall was a symbol, and its fall marked the collapse of a symbolic system.... Dictators and democrats will no longer be so easy to classify" (p. 10).

Borneman traces the development of the GDR from its founding days to the rushed events of 1989-90, culminating in the total collapse of the East German state. Ordinary people are central to Borneman's account, which focuses on subjects he has interviewed intensively over long periods of time. He brings them to the reader as individuals "in flesh and bone." These individuals, in spite

of their unique stories, illustrate the contrasts in perceptions, emotions, and motivations between East and West Germans that have created two worlds with distinct collective identities. Borneman mourns the disappearance of the East German world, lost to the pervasive attraction of a Western identity.

The author recounts the forty years of East German history and the events of the so-called "Autumn Revolution" in Eastern Europe in 1989. He then takes the reader into the world behind the Berlin Wall, giving him a glimpse of how it looked from the inside. Finally, the reader visits the personal world of some East Germans after the opening of the Berlin Wall. Yet whenever his subjects speak, Borneman extrapolates from their encounters and applies the experience described by one person to East Germans as a whole.

In one instance, a fifty-five year-old filmmaker searches for the roots of her nostalgic idea of socialism. She unravels the origins and decay of socialism while helping her father write his autobiography. Her discoveries are the sad story of decline. Later, the reader meets Mrs. Gruner, a retired judge and law professor. Borneman recounts her experiences and impressions, from her optimistic school days during the Weimar Republic to her increasing disenchantment and ultimate resignation. After participating in a demonstration on December 14, 1989, her first since 1949, Frau Gruner says, "We were unanimous against unification. People called 'Nazis out!' 'Never again Fascism!'" (p. 126). "Like so many citizens of the state," Borneman comments, "she never felt she belonged to a true nation.... She was an exile, a displaced person, homeless despite her apartment and her respected position, despite her seventy-eight years of life on German soil, despite the dedication with which she'd served the land that claimed her" (p. 124).

Life stories like Mrs. Gruner's abound in Borneman's book. They are diverse and highly personal, yet they all seem to have a common note of hopelessness, almost an awareness of death. The book's negative mood extends to the description of the West, the land behind the Berlin Wall, which is represented by "fear, guilt and revenge." After reading through so much misery, one wonders if it is necessary to compile such despair and make it available to the public. Borneman explains, "The scope of this book has been narrow. I have tried to describe the nature of a vanishing society" (p. 250). Left somewhat uncertain as to the benefit of this account of personal failures, the curious reader finds Borneman's justification only at the end of his book, where he reveals his political bias:

Capitalism brought abundance at a price.... There is no law of either economics or psychology that dictates that a washing machine should stupefy social awareness or that a shopping bag full of fruit should eviscerate the will to organize and vote. Yet in...capitalist society such barter of self-expression and self-will for the material objects of desire take place every day (pp. 252-253).

In this view, neither capitalism nor socialism can achieve democracy, and East Germany, accordingly, just sold out to another, more subtly-repressive

system. The reader of *After the Wall* is well-advised to keep these theoretical premises in mind when studying the personal accounts, for this may offer an explanation for the air of defeat. Much of the material collected in this book is garnered from the leftist-intellectual milieu of East Berlin and may not apply to East German society as a whole. The method of discrediting a societal system on the basis of a few, if well-researched, case studies is highly questionable.

Nevertheless, in his attempt to bring the perceptions of a concerned few to the American public, which is often unexposed to the emotional experiences of other cultures, Borneman points to a dictum of German unity certainly worth remembering:

Any version of German selfhood which does not [include the divisions in people's own personal histories] will only create further divisions, pitting its abstract and streamlined ideal of history against the truth of human lives (p. 228).

If understood as an attempt to sketch Borneman's perception of the truth of *some* East Germans' lives, which may or may not be indicative of a lost identity, this book is a welcome piece of information which adds to the understanding of a unified Germany.