

Introduction

This book takes as its subject the rituals, practices, and perceptions surrounding death in one of the world's great metropolises – the city of Berlin – over a period of historical change as extraordinary and sustained as any in modern memory. Between the last years of the Weimar Republic and the construction of the Berlin Wall, over three turbulent decades, Berlin was fundamentally transformed time and again: from a latter-day Babel and the capital of a sick and dying republic, to the headquarters of the Nazi revolution, to the seat of Axis power in World War II. After Germany's defeat in that epic conflagration, the city was split in two: one half became the capital of the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR), the other an outpost of liberal democracy, territorially unmoored from the state – the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) – to which it belonged. From the panic of the Great Depression to the establishment of the Nazis' racial empire, to war, genocide, occupation, and national division, the changes this city endured and itself visited upon the world were staggering in their scope and frequency.

Yet the subject of this book – death – is something we instinctively think of as immutable. Throughout the time during which I have researched and written about death in Berlin, two anecdotes from my childhood have continually come to mind. I thought of them as guideposts, of a kind, for what interested me most about a subject not a few people tend to assume is depressing and even ghoulish. The anecdotes come from the two very different sides of my family. My mother's father's family were tobacco farmers in rural Randolph County, North Carolina. My maternal great-grandmother had fifteen children, about half of them daughters. It was customary on Friday evenings for the daughters, my great-aunts, along with my great-grandmother, to pile in the car and drive to the local funeral parlor for the viewing. It made no difference of any kind whether they

knew the person laid out at the funeral home or his or her family. They would return home and tell how well or poorly the person looked, how lifelike or not, and what a good (or, less often, bad) job the funeral director had done. In fact, it was easier for them to make such judgments when they were not acquainted with the dead person or his or her family.

The other side of my family were central Europeans and city dwellers. My father's parents were Hungarians and lived all of their lives in Budapest; that is, until the end of 1944. Having fled the Red Army during the battle for Budapest, they found themselves in 1945 in a Displaced Persons camp in the British occupation zone of Germany, near Cologne, where they lived for several years before emigrating to Argentina. Perhaps it was the stark and unforeseen and sudden vicissitudes of history that gave them a dark sense of humor. To give an example of what they found funny, one of my paternal grandparents' favorite arguments was about which of them would die first and by what method – suicide being among them. My great-grandmother and great-aunts from rural North Carolina would have found that kind of talk “morbid.” Yet they did not for one instant see going to the funeral parlor on Friday night to look at dead strangers that way. Viewings were nothing more than a genial and perfectly ordinary country pastime.

This lore from my childhood illustrates that, though the fact of death remains a constant of the human condition across space and time, our ways of thinking about it can be dramatically different across cultures. What may seem morbid, sacrilegious, unethical, or unnatural in one cultural context may simply be humorous in another. This extends to how we treat the physical bodies of the dead as well, which is almost necessarily bound up with moral concerns – that is, concerns about “right” and “wrong” ways of doing things. One of the fascinating aspects of the rituals of death – how the bodies of the dead are prepared for burial, how funerals are conducted, how corpses are disposed of, how we memorialize and talk about the dead, even what we wear to funerals, and whether or not we sing songs or talk or weep during them – is that, though there are no rule books that tell us how these matters are to be accomplished, we know when they are done “wrong” or in a way that makes us or others uncomfortable. This knowledge is by no means an innate or instinctive matter; it is a matter of culture at its most profound level. The practices of death are embedded within a complex web of values, attitudes, and sensibilities that are specific to a group of people in a particular time and allow individuals to know, almost unconsciously, what to do and *what not to do* where the dead are concerned.¹ It is for this

1 Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 204–6.

reason that anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and other students of human life, communities, and behavior have so often turned to the rites and methods by which human beings take their leave of the dead to see what they can extract from them about the deeper layers of culture, those layers of which the practitioners of the rites and methods of death are themselves often quite unaware.

Within the thirty-odd years spanned by this book, Berlin stood at the center of some of the most dramatic events not only in German but also in European and world history. Circa 1930, when this narrative commences, the Weimar Republic was a democracy, but one deeply imperiled by rising political extremism and the ravages of the Great Depression, not least in its embattled capital, Berlin. Soon, a significant enough number of the German electorate, seeking an alternative to the seeming indecision and dysfunction of republican politics, would throw their support behind the authoritarian and populist message of Adolf Hitler, catapulting his National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP, or Nazi Party) to electoral success and himself to the chancellorship of Germany. Many Berliners would welcome both Hitler and the party to power with torchlight parades and patriotic songs. Nazism was less a concrete plan of political action than a set of doctrines aimed at a cultural revolution, a radical reshaping of German society into a *Volksgemeinschaft* – a people's, or racial, community. Over the coming years, the Nazis would project their fantasies of absolute power and racial utopia on Berlin in countless ways, revising the city in their image.

In 1939, the Nazis launched World War II, the single most destructive conflict in human history, by invading neighboring Poland. They directed that war from Berlin, and it was in the Third Reich's capital, too, that they outlined their plans to construct an empire based on race in Eastern Europe by enslaving and resettling whole populations and by carrying out genocide and ethnic cleansing. Even as this project went forward, victory eluded Germany's grasp; the front moved closer to Berlin, and the city became the site of intense aerial bombardment that left tens of thousands of civilians dead and laid waste to the built city – its apartment houses, factories, bridges, streets, parks, and cemeteries. In the end, Berlin was the final European battleground of that cataclysmic war. When the fighting stopped, the city's defeat and destruction were total. On May 8, 1945, in Karlshorst, a suburb outside Berlin, what was left of the German armed forces surrendered to the triumphant Soviets.

Now occupied by the armies of the wartime Allies, Berlin would be reinvented again in the years that followed World War II. Divided between a communist East and a liberal-democratic West, the city became ground zero in the Cold War and the staging ground for two rival ideas of how to

construct a good society.² Berlin was the site of the first major crisis of the Cold War – the Berlin blockade and airlift – which seemed to anticipate World War III. That did not come to pass, but shortly thereafter, Germany and Berlin were formally divided nonetheless. Over the next twelve years, East and West Berlin began gradually to develop unique and independent personalities and ways of life. But it was not until a summer morning in 1961 that the city's division became concrete. On August 13, Berliners East and West woke up to find their city indelibly – and, seemingly, permanently – severed, by a wall that would stand as physical evidence of a dictatorial East German communism.

These are the broad outlines, the backdrop of social, political, and ideological change, that provide the crucial setting and context in which this history of death in Berlin unfolds. Throughout the turmoil of the decades between 1930 and that summer morning in 1961 when the Berlin Wall went up, death was a constant, as it always is in human affairs. Across dramatically different styles of political rule and in radically dissimilar ideological circumstances; through the vagaries of total war, aerial bombardment, and its aftermath; through foreign occupation and the imposition of new forms of governance and social organization, Berliners – men and women, religious and nonreligious, rich and poor, notable and obscure – died, and they were buried, mourned, and remembered by their families and friends, peers, pastors, and colleagues. Over three decades of radical change, Berliners thought about their own deaths and the possibility of an afterlife, imagined heaven or final judgment or the attainment of nirvana. They attended the funerals of loved ones, grieved for and celebrated the dead, and tended their graves. Yet the many practices through which Berliners related to death in an abstract sense and cared for the dead in a literal sense, their ways of memorializing and those whom they chose to memorialize, and even their thoughts about the hereafter were never fixed. They shifted over time as political, social, ideological, material, and other circumstances changed.

This book aims to tell an alternative history of the great metropolis Berlin – a tale of a city indelibly shaped and continually remade by its inhabitants' changing encounters with and experiences and understandings of death. In each iteration of their city, Berliners were forced to confront the fact and evidence and consequences of mortality on slightly changed terms, terms they themselves constructed and reconstructed anew, though they were almost always unaware of doing so. If a city is, as Lewis Mumford said so memorably, a “conscious work of art,” then we cannot understand it and

2 Mary Fulbrook, *Interpretations of the Two Germanies, 1945–1990* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 2.

its continual creation and re-creation apart from the minds of its millions of creators. At the same time, Mumford sagely observed, we must also be attuned to ways in which the mental is conditioned by existing “urban forms” as well as by changing times and needs, shifting material conditions, new forms of social organization, politics, and so on.³ Through the rituals and customs of death and Berliners’ shifting relationship to their dead, the city’s inhabitants articulated an evolving sense of who they were as a community. Yet this relationship and these customs and rituals – even under the rule of revolutionary regimes like those of the Nazis and communists – were always based in tradition and rooted in older ways of doing things.

Death is of course a classic topic in the history of mentalities precisely because it can help reveal popular beliefs and show us the role of human imagination, collective structures of morality, and patterns of emotion in history. The great Carlo Ginzburg noted that the history of mentalities is often characterized by a focus “on the inert, obscure, unconscious elements in a given world view. Survivals, archaisms, the emotional, the irrational: all these are included in the specific field of the history of mentalities.”⁴ At the same time, Ginzburg stressed that his exploration of the mind of the sixteenth-century miller Menocchio in *The Cheese and the Worms* would have been incomplete without examining its rationalist components. What this book shows is how unexamined aspects of culture – those that structure existence so quietly and unobtrusively that they are often entirely unnoticed by contemporaries, like the values attached to death – are nevertheless the subject of concerted mental activity, as contemporaries work through their meanings and change them. The study also aims to show how death – something utterly ubiquitous and that mostly appeared to contemporaries to be unchanging and even unchangeable – became the basis for collective reinvention over a variety of contexts.

This task is complicated by the fact that little has been written about death in twentieth-century Germany in its broadest sense outside the context of the world wars and the Holocaust. What has been written has tended to focus less on cultural patterns and private perceptions, long-standing practices and traditional sensibilities, and more on a few key issues – the national cult surrounding war death being a principal one.⁵ When I set

3 Lewis Mumford, *The Lewis Mumford Reader*, Donald L. Miller, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 104.

4 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. by J. and A. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), xxiii.

5 Sabine Behrenbeck, *Der Kult um die toten Helden: Nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole 1923 bis 1945* (Vierow bei Greifswald: SH-Verlag, 1996); Jay Baird, *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990); George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping*

out to write this book I wanted to see how I might create a framework for bringing together the killing and dying associated with the world wars and the Holocaust and cultural perceptions of death that existed before, during, and after those events. That framework, as it has evolved, is narrative and chronological and attempts to be as scrupulously attentive to minute changes and historical specificity in one, circumscribed setting as the sources permit. I attempt to connect the reality and enormity and suddenness of mass, violent death in Germany (including deaths in which Germans were involved outside their national borders) with experiences of individual loss, long-term cultural patterns, and evolving mental structures related to death in its more prosaic, private, and “everyday” forms.⁶ The aim, ultimately, is to understand the centrality of death to the evolving moral and social life of Berliners as an “imagined metropolitan community,”⁷ in a city that stood at the center of some of the mid-twentieth century’s most transformative events. In doing so, I attempt to navigate and find the connections between the intimacies of the everyday and events on the grand historical stage that changed the lives of millions.

Perhaps the most immediate reference point for scholars of death in the European context is the work of the French historian Philippe Ariès. One of the central contentions of his great work, *The Hour of Our Death*, was that death, previously an intimate event experienced in the bosom of the family and community, and presided over authoritatively through the ancient rituals of the church, had become terrifying in modernity.⁸ Ariès argued that, under the influence of secularization and medicalization, Europeans (and Americans) had come to shun death, to banish the dying to hospitals. As conservative and even quixotic as he was, and as much as he resented what he perceived as the destabilizing effects of modernity,⁹ Ariès was nonetheless a man of his times, writing in a grand tradition arising out of the French Enlightenment that saw human development tending

the Memory of the World Wars (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Klaus Latzel, *Vom Sterben im Krieg: Wandlungen in der Einstellung zum Soldatentod vom Siebenjährigen Krieg bis zum II. Weltkrieg* (Warendorf: Verlag Fahlbusch & Co., 1988).

6 Essays in a recent collection have explored related issues: Alon Confino, Paul Betts, and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York: Berghahn, 2008).

7 This is Benjamin Carter Hett’s riff on Benedict Anderson’s now-ubiquitous idea. Hett, *Death in the Tiergarten: Murder and Criminal Justice in the Kaiser’s Berlin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 11.

8 Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Vintage, 1982).

9 Patrick Hutton, *Philippe Ariès and the Politics of French Cultural History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 116–17. See also Hutton, “Philippe Ariès: Between Tradition and History,” in idem, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, NH: University of New England Press, 1993), 91–105.

inevitably toward greater individualism and away from the communitarian values and relationships of the past. This narrative powerfully influenced his account of death in modernity, but so did his own experiences. “In my youth,” he wrote, “women in mourning were invisible under their crepe and voluminous black veils. Middle class children whose grandmothers had died were dressed in violet. After 1945, my mother wore mourning for a son killed in the war for the twenty-odd years that remained to her.” Yet such venerable customs as these had died away within Ariès’ own lifetime. After a death in French towns, he observed, “there is no way of knowing that something has happened: the old black and silver hearse has become an ordinary gray limousine, indistinguishable from the flow of traffic. Society no longer observes a pause; the disappearance of an individual no longer affects its continuity. Everything in town goes on as if nobody died anymore.”¹⁰

Sociologist Glennys Howarth argues that it was shortly before Ariès’ book was published that “the denial of death thesis” emerged. It had resulted, she explains, from the influence on scholars of Sigmund Freud’s conception of denial as a shield against trauma.¹¹ In the 1950s and 1960s, such sociologists as Briton Geoffrey Gorer, who influenced Ariès,¹² regarded death as practically a new form of pornography, so “shameful” had it become for modern people.¹³ Yet Ariès and Gorer are good examples of why forms of explanation that rely on grand narratives – such as “individualization” or other modernist paradigms – have fallen out of favor in recent decades. For what is so striking about both scholars is that they for the most part viewed attitudes toward death in a strange state of abstraction from the catastrophic events of mass death – the world wars and the Holocaust – that unfolded even in their own lifetimes, involved members of their own nations, and brought human beings into close contact with death and corpses in unprecedented ways.¹⁴

What motivates the present study is a desire to bridge the distance scholars like Ariès and Gorer maintained when discussing attitudes toward death

10 Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 560.

11 Glennys Howarth, *Death and Dying: A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2007), 31.

12 Allan Mitchell, “Philippe Ariès and the French Way of Death,” *French Historical Studies* 10: 4 (Autumn 1978): 684–95.

13 Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (Salem: Ayer, 1987; first published in 1965).

14 Luc Capdevila and Danièle Voldman, *War Dead: Western Societies and the Casualties of War*, trans. Richard Veasey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) manages to stick to the modernizing narrative of Ariès while still being attentive to the close proximity between the dead and the living in the first half of the twentieth century.