STERN PRIZE

DEATH IN BERLIN, 1933–1961

Fritz Stern Dissertation Prize Presentation, November 16, 2007

Monica Black
Furman University

In summer 1945, Berliner Willy Hennig later recalled, he received a request from the wife of a colleague. She had just received the news that her husband, a soldier who had fought in the battle for Berlin in April, had been killed near the Gotzkowsky Bridge in Moabit. People who lived nearby, who saw him bleed to death, had buried him there. The widow asked Hennig and four other colleagues and friends for a favor. "We organized a big handcart," Hennig wrote, "and left before 5 am from Baumschulenweg, down the Sonnenallee." The widow had procured a simple coffin. "Before Neukölln a Soviet guard stopped us. We were able to explain to him that we wanted to pick up our fallen friend who was buried in the north of Berlin. He let us pass. It was a long way to Gotzkowsky Bridge and soon it was very warm. The widow had arranged everything for the burial with the pastor at the cemetery in Baumschulenweg, so that when we got back with our dead friend the funeral could take place." This, Hennig said, was a "final duty of honor" to his friend.[1]

When I first began the research for my dissertation on customs and perceptions of death in Berlin, 1933 to 1961, I ran across a lot of stories like this one concerning the months just after the fall of Berlin. In fact, what originally caught my attention when I began the project were numerous references to *Umbettungen* in some of the files of the post-1945 municipal government, or Magistrat, which I located in the Berlin Landesarchiv.[2] I had no idea what the word meant and had to ask one of the gentlemen sharing a work table with me in the reading room, "Excuse me, please, but what does '*Umbettung*' mean?" It was soon explained to me that the word meant "reburial," but this hardly clarified anything. It would take me some time to understand that in 1945, tens of thousands of people—civilian Berliners, Soviet and German soldiers, members of the *Volkssturm*, and others—had ended up hastily buried in temporary graves all over the city to prevent the spread of disease. Within weeks, even in the heat of summer and the desperate material conditions of the ruined city,

Berliners were already beginning to remove their dead from these temporary graves and to rebury them in "proper" cemeteries.

It took me quite a while longer to begin to historicize and then to interpret what that experience meant to contemporaries and to try and grasp why, in a moment of crisis and dislocation, many had apparently seen the reburial of their dead, of all things, as an essential task. A discourse had existed in Germany since at least the First World War holding that the meticulous care Germans showed their dead was one of the key virtues elevating Germany to the status of *Kulturvolk*, one that marked the German nation as a bearer of *Kultur*, rather than mere *Zivilisation*.[3] During the Third Reich in Berlin, arguments emerged in favor of "purifying" the German cult of the dead from "foreign" elements by reforming the design of cemeteries, promoting one or another form of burial, resurrecting the putative burial practices of Germanic ancestors, and, perhaps most pointedly, by banning Jews from "German" cemeteries. Under Nazism, in other words, the practices and customs of death often became a means of emphasizing supposedly "timeless" and fundamental distinctions between Germans and Jews. But particularly over the last months of Nazi rule in the Reich's capital, the burial of the dead became an even more decisive instrument for conflating and symbolically marking out racial, cultural, and moral distinctions. As the air war escalated over the winter of 1943–1944, and space for burial began to run out and coffins became harder and harder to come by, Hitler proscribed the burial of *Volksgenossen* in mass graves and city authorities distributed coffins exclusively to members of the racial community.

Despite such measures, by the end of the war, a chaotic situation had developed in Berlin resulting in what I have characterized as a "burial crisis," one that was simultaneously material, emotional, and psychological. By the time the Red Army arrived in Berlin in April, the routine provision of burial services in the city had all but collapsed. Thousands of Berliners had to bury their dead where they could, often in parks and gardens. Great pains were taken and large sums expended to acquire coffins. In most cases, however, the dead were simply wrapped in sheets or tablecloths, and their homemade graves adorned with helmets, tree branches, bits of stone, or crosses made from available materials. Dotting the postwar landscape from one end of the city to the other, these crosses became a potent symbol of German defeat, whose presence was simultaneously so arresting and yet so ubiquitous that there is hardly a memoir of the period that fails to mention them.[4]

This was only one part of the context in which postwar reburials took place, however. Immediately after the fall of the Third Reich, stories

began to circulate in the communist press implicating the Nazis in the wartime desecration of the dead. Almost from the beginning of its existence, the German Communist Party (KPD) newspaper *Deutsche Volkszeitung* was filled with tales of Nazis tossing the naked bodies of Berlin's dead into open pits before throwing grave registers to the four winds in a diabolical gesture aimed, it was said, at erasing the identities of the dead.[5] Other reports described the bodies of soldiers left to rot in the open across the plains of eastern Europe.[6] Such stories were clearly intended to vilify the Nazi regime in a very particular, and, to many Berliners, personal way. The western-sector press soon took up similar themes, again emphasizing the obliteration of the individual identities of the dead while simultaneously blurring the differences between "foreign workers," those killed in the air war, those implicated in the plot to assassinate Hitler in July 1944, and German and Soviet soldiers. All were equally "victims" of "Hitler" and "the war," press reports implied; all had been equally dishonored in death.[7]

Whether or not "Nazis" were directly responsible for deliberate attempts to erase the identities of the dead in Berlin in the last weeks of the war and to desecrate their bodies, as the communist and western press alleged, the point is that these stories were emerging at nearly the same moment that detailed revelations of the Holocaust were becoming part of public discourse. Radio broadcasts and films like *Die Todesmühlen* (The Death Mills) were introducing German audiences to the notorious images we now so indelibly associate with the genocide.[8] Many contemporary sources—memoirs, letters, and newspaper editorials—are pervaded by fears of depersonalized death and improper (meaning mass) burial.

And it was in that same moment that some Berliners reported that reburials were taking place. One Berlin woman apprised authorities in August 1945 that a grave she had often noticed near her apartment in Flensburger Straße, which had always been lovingly tended and decorated with forget-me-nots, had suddenly disappeared.[9] It is true that such reburials were not always the work of family or friends: *Leichenkommandos* (corpse details), in the local parlance, were organized by the Red Army early on to begin the process of removing graves from unfavorable locations and relocating remains to cemeteries. Yet sources also reveal instances in which contemporaries, like Willy Hennig, recalled being asked by family members or friends to help them rebury a loved one. For at least some Berliners, I argue, rescuing the dead from the shame of oblivion and improper burial was both a gesture of fellow feeling and, in some sense, an attempt to save them from the terrors of mass, anonymous death—a horror to which Germans had only recently subjected Jews and other "racial outsiders," but could not sanction for themselves.[10]

In this and other ways, the practices of burial would continue to figure into the reconstruction of Berlin—understood as a moral project—long after 1945. In both east and west, restoring "piety" to the city's burial regime became a way of distancing postwar Germany from its Nazi past and of reconstructing civic life on new terms. In East Berlin, for example, a renewed emphasis was placed on socializing burial. The burial practices of Jews, at least as understood by East German functionaries, were not infrequently held up as a new, egalitarian, cultural ideal.[11] Yet memories of the war often limited endeavors to reform burial in curious ways. Officials in both East and West Berlin pointed to an apparent decline in cremation after the war, which some linked to the "memory of the mass burnings in the concentration camps."[12] It has often been lamented that most postwar Germans saw themselves as victims and failed to take responsibility for the atrocities committed under National Socialist rule.[13] Yet thinking about both the issue of reburials and the vague fears some Berliners apparently associated with cremation after 1945 suggests how discourses and representations of guilt and victimization concerning the recent past commingled in a particular urban, social context and became the lens through which postwar Berliners interpreted their own experiences of the war and Nazism. That some contemporaries may have adopted the position of the victims of the Holocaust so literally after 1945 that they feared their own dead befalling the fate of the millions who perished in Auschwitz demands our attention, especially as it took place well after the fall of Nazism. For at least some Berliners, the crimes associated with the defunct Nazi regime were not so much past as real and present dangers—of which their dead were potential victims.

In West Berlin, neither the state nor the municipality made the concerted attempts to reform the practices of death that were made in the East. Yet the emergence of new ideological, social, and cultural values made themselves felt in the practices of death all the same. An increasingly liberal political outlook gradually led to the rejection of authoritarian cultural norms that had long endured in Germany regarding such matters as cemetery design and the style of headstones—norms that continued to be upheld in the East. West Berliners ultimately abandoned these in favor of more individualistic mortuary iconography, rituals of burial, and views of mourning. Yet emerging cultural differences between East and West where death was concerned were muted throughout the 1950s by continuities in cultural traditions, shared memories of the past and of the war dead, and by the mobility that still prevailed for Berliners on both sides of the border. Until August 1961, the city's inhabitants continued largely to bury and visit their dead as they liked, regardless of where in the city they resided. It was only with the building

of the Berlin Wall that such activity was decisively curtailed and that truly different cultures of death began to develop in East and West.

Interpreting social practice in the way I have tried to describe here is admittedly not without its perils for historians. Berliners in 1945 did not describe *why* they reburied loved ones, for example: They treated it as a natural and self-evident matter of respect, a "last duty of honor," as Willy Hennig put it. Yet the insights of anthropologists of death are tremendously useful in comprehending such ritual activity. Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington once described the moral authority of rites of death: Funerals, modes of burial and the like, they argued, "are subtly governed by notions of propriety, notions that ordinary people are not in the habit of formulating in words yet that they regularly put into action in moments of crisis."[14] What my study of death in Berlin seeks to demonstrate is that the meanings Berliners assigned to death and the practices of burial were continually subject to disruption and reconstruction. Over a period of thirty years, though Berliners' ways of dealing with their dead remained fundamentally similar, the city's inhabitants nevertheless perpetually reinvented the moral standards they linked to the procedures of burial and to the exacting choreography of funerary ritual as material, ideological, economic, political, and other circumstances shifted. In doing so, they consistently rearticulated the metaphors, assumptions, conventions, principles, habits, and "fundamental tools of thought" by which they lived in radically different historical contexts.[15] Yet despite their constitutive relationship to social existence, these tools, conventions, habits, and assumptions concerning the practices of burial nevertheless went almost entirely unexamined.

It is curious that although cultural history has become perhaps the dominant mode in which history is now written, most of the groundbreaking texts in the history of mentalities in the German-speaking world deal with the late medieval and early modern periods.[16] Yet more attention to classic subjects in the history of mentalities by historians of modern Germany can, I believe, yield new and significant insights. Certainly, in order to understand the truly astonishing feats of collective invention and reinvention in which Germans engaged over the period 1933 to 1961, we have to search out topics of investigation that get at the symbols and meanings that quietly, unobtrusively, and unremarkably structured and restructured existence even as they in turn were restructured by experience. Topics like death necessarily involve exploring a tremendously varied corpus of texts, some profound, others quotidian. Yet despite their diverse origins and purposes, the sources I consulted for my study almost universally conveyed the sense of moral concern that so often underpins social relationships with the dead. This made them especially revealing of cultural values and how they shifted in three Berlins.

Notes

[1] Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB) F Rep 240 Acc 2651/4, Zeitgeschichtliche Sammlung, "Preisausschreiben. Berlin nach dem Kriege—wie ich es erlebte," 1976–1977. Entry of Willy Hennig.

[2] The record group containing many of these files is LAB C Rep 110, Magistrat von Berlin, Abteilung Bauwesen.

[3] George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990), 85.

[4] A few examples include: Anonyma, *Eine Frau in Berlin: Tagebuchaufzeichnungen vom 20. April bis 22. Juni 1945* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003); Wilfred Byford-Jones, *Berlin Twilight* (London, 1947); Ingrid Hammer and Susanne zur Nieden, eds., *Sehr selten habe ich geweint: Briefe und Tagebücher aus dem Zweiten Weltkrieg von Menschen aus Berlin* (Zurich, 1992); Georg Holmsten, *Als keiner wußte, ob er überlebt: Zwischen den Sommern 1944/45* (Dusseldorf, 1995); Matthias Menzel, *Die Stadt ohne Tod: Berliner Tagebuch 1943/45* (Berlin, 1946); Curt Riess, *Berlin Berlin, 1945–1953* (Berlin, 2002); Ursula von Kardorff, *Berliner Aufzeichnungen 1942 bis 1945* (Munich, 1992).

[5] "Viel Tausend Gräber klagen an. Ein Friedhof von vielen. Die Totengräber unseres Volkes," *Deutsche Volkszeitung*, July 18, 1945.

[6] See, for example, Willi Bredel, "Der Totengräber," *Deutsche Volkszeitung*, June 24, 1945.

[7] R. Le., "Auf dem Friedhof von Marzahn: Hier liegen die Hingerichteten," *Neue Zeit*, October 31, 1945.

[8] Anonyma, *Eine Frau in Berlin*, 244, entry for 27 May 1945, discusses the radio broadcasts; Dagmar Barnouw, *Germany 1945: Views of War and Violence* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996) and Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, 1997), describe how the German public was presented with images from Nazi camps beginning in 1945.

[9] Deutsche Dienststelle-WASt, Bestattungsunterlagen Berlin 344, Ordner 74, Alphabetisch C-F, 1945–1962. Certified copy of letter to Deutsche Dienststelle, n.d., presumably August 1945.

[10] I develop this argument further in Monica Black, "Reburying and Rebuilding: Reflecting on Proper Burial after 'Zero Hour'," in *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. Alon Confino, Paul Betts, and Dirk Schumann (forthcoming).

[11] Bundesarchiv-Berlin (BA) DO 1/8703, An das Ministerium des Innern des Landes Sachsen, betr.: kostenlose Totenbestattung, October 24, 1950.

[12] See LAB C Rep 118/878. Vermerk, DDR Ministerium für Gesundheitswesen, June 26, 1952 and BA DO 4/2162, "Das Bestattungs- und Friedhofswesen in der DDR," 9, n.d.

[13] Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Useable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley, 2003).

[14] Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (Cambridge, 1991), 204.

[15] William Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), 131.

[16] I have in mind such works as: Wolfgang Behringer, *The Shaman of Oberstdorf: Chonrad Stoeckhlin and the Phantoms of the Night* (Charlottesville, Va., 1998); Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia, 2006); Craig Koslovsky, *The Reformation of the Dead: Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany* (New York, 2000); David Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1984). There are, of course, exceptions to this general observation: David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in a Nineteenth-Century German Village* (New York, 1995) is a great one.