Germany: The ambivalence of normalization

By YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

BERLIN—Christmas came early to the Ku'damm, West Berlin's main commercial avenue. By late November, small white lights forming simulated trees were wrapped around lampposts, bridges of light strung high across the avenue. It was as though Christmas were a pretext for Berlin to celebrate itself, its renewed sense of wholeness.

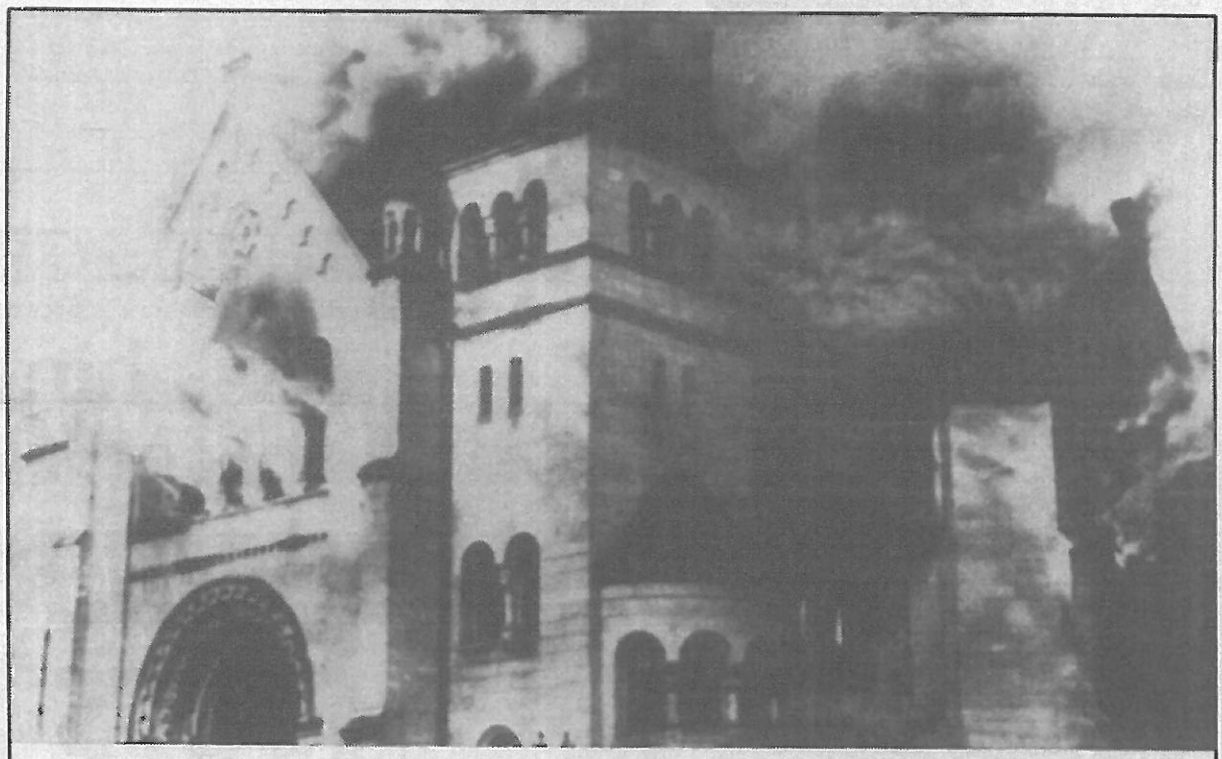
Despite the cold that turned patches of snow to ice, crowds of East and West Berliners filled the Ku'damm till late at night. At some places on the avenue the crowds were so thick that they came to a complete standstill. The East Berliners were easy to identify. They walked in groups, often entire families, children hoisted on the shoulders of fathers. The young people wore denim, the older people black leather coats. They walked more slowly than the West Berliners, and lingered before the elegant shops, almost pressing their faces against the glass. They stood on street corners, simply looking up—at the tall buildings, the neon signs advertising Italian liqueurs and Swiss watches, the giant screen greeting visitors from the East and offering helpful hints about where they should shop.

A few weeks after the opening of the Wall, the thrill of freedom had been transformed to a simple delight in normalcy. One East German told me, amazed at his own casualness, "This afternoon I crossed over to the West. Then I went back to the East for dinner. And I came back to the West tonight."

But Berlin was celebrating more than just the normalcy of its open wall, relief at the sudden neutralizing of a once-feared barrier. There was, one felt on the Ku'damm, relief in the normalcy of being German.

The West German national colors appeared in unexpected ways. One man on the Ku'damm wore a ski cap with black, red and yellow bands, the colors of the West German flag. On a misty lake in a remote Berlin suburb, with only ducks to notice, the German flag flew from a rowboat. For the first time, Germans could flaunt their nationalism without arousing the world's suspicions of Nazi revivalism.

Several blocks along the Ku'damm were devoted to a celebration of German-style Christmas. Booths made of wooden logs sold hot wine, sugar-dusted fruit cake, knockwurst and bratwurst, miniature carved village houses, honey-scented candles. A family sang carols, the parents dressed in black capes and round black village hats, the two little girls wearing silver wings. People gathered around and smiled, warmed by the display of German goodness. It seemed on the Ku'damm that the Germans had finally overcome their history, normalized their national identity.



November 9, the day the Wall came down, is also the anniversary of Kristallnacht. 'Imagine the confusion inside German heads. How can they ever get the normalization they crave if even the great celebration about the Wall can't be free of Kristallnacht?"

Normalization or Glory?

Since the end of World War II, the desire for full moral rehabilitation has been at the center of German national aspiration. But only with the breaching of the Wall did the moral normalization of Germany really seem possible. For the first time, the Germans had celebrated democracy, a victory over dictatorship. On the 50th anniversary of the beginning of World War II, as ceremonies all over Europe were reminding people of Germany's crimes, the Germans had managed to create a sense of positive wonder about themselves.

But because nothing in Germany ever seems easy or straightforward, the Germans today face this irony: just as the opening of the Wall has created the possibility for Germany's normalization, it has opened the way for an opposite yearning, the old German dream of national glory. Having within reach their first real chance at becoming a nation like other nations, they are confronted again with ambitions which twice in this century made them pariahs.

With the breaching of the Wall, reunification of East and West Germany is no longer utopian but a practical political goal. And with German reunification comes the temptation of German power. In the bars, one can hear men boast that a reunited Germany with 80 million clever and efficient citizens will become an economic superpower, another Japan at least. For some Germans, economic power means not only increased prosperity but a new way of attaining German pre-eminence, and even territorial expansion. While only the lunatic right dreams of renewed military glory, expansionism is a more acceptable ambition. Among the T-shirts being sold to celebrate the opening of the Wall is one with a map of Germany that includes territories it lost to Poland after World War II.

With Poland desperate for economic aid, some Germans fantasize about peacefully "buying" the lost territories, offering economic aid in exchange for land. One can hear this same scenario from German leftists and rightists, expressed either as warning or boast: We failed to colonize Eastern Europe militarily, but now we will do it economically.

The danger of extreme nationalism should not be exaggerated. A solid majority of both East and West Germans want reunification not because they covet Polish territories but because—as would any other people in their position—they hope to end the abnormal division of their country into two hostile states, each the nuclear front line for a rival super-power.

Still, the dreamers of revived German glory are powerful enough to keep the territorial issue alive in West German politics. And it is the nationalist minority, rather than the moderate majority, that will likely be strengthened by the emotional fervor surrounding reunification.

The opening of the Wall, then, has given the Germans this test: to finally resolve whether their deepest collective need is for normalization or national glory. One need undermines the other; the Germans cannot fulfill them both.

Paradoxical Fears

I have spoken with people here who, in another time, would have been called "decent Germans." They oppose nationalist excess, and guard against amnesia of the Nazi past. Some are in the Church, some on the left, some in movements seeking reconciliation with the Jews and other Nazi victims.

All of them expressed varying degrees of anxiety about reunification. The chairman of the Protestant youth movement in West Berlin, an anarchist who wears a red star on his coat lapel, told me, "If there is one Germany, I will go into exile."

And yet there was no clear pattern in their fears, only paradox. Some of those I spoke with are afraid that Europe will be destabilized by renewed German militarism; while others fear the opposite—West Germany's withdrawal from NATO and the creation of a neutralized Germany. Some fear German economic dominance; but others recall that the greater danger here has always been economic instability. Some are so mistrustful of their fellow Germans that they refused to join in the national rejoicing over the defeat of the Wall, sensing that when events go well for Germany it must eventually go badly for the rest of Europe; yet others mistrust German brooding, and know that when the Germans are not happy they tend to make everyone else unhappy with them.

The question underlining all their contradictory anxieties is this: Are the Germans ready to normalize their relationship with the rest of the world, or do they still see humanity hierarchically, divided between superior and inferior peoples? Do they want to participate as equals in international cooperation, or do they want to dominate?

Rev. Wolfgang Raupach is the director of West Germany's Aktion Suhnezeichen, or Action for Reconciliation, a Protestant Church-sponsored movement that sends young Germans for voluntary work to Israel and Poland, as penance for Nazi crimes. Raupach is an intensely serious man with a goatee and long blond hair falling straight from a bald head. Above his desk is a painting of a Jew whose eyes are wide with terror, holding up an identity card stamped with the letter "J."

Raupach acknowledges the positive changes that have occurred in West Germany since the war. He notes that democracy, initially imposed on the West Germans, has proven a subversive system, undermining autocratic values. Government clerks, for example, no longer see themselves as part of an all-powerful bureaucracy above reproach, but as civil servants helping citizens realize their rights.

Still, says Raupach, xenophobia here remains strong. "We are self-absorbed," he says. "Our TV news is mostly about Germany, to such an extent that we need special programs about world news. It is an old German tradition: we see ourselves as the center of the world. I don't mean imperialistically; those times are gone. But it affects our attitudes toward

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and stairways, many of the grey buildings on East Berlin streets would be considered tenements in the West. The buildings form a near-continuum, their monotonous solidity broken by an occasional abandoned structure that looks like a bombed remnant from the war.

But then one comes upon scattered rows of modern, pastel-colored apartment buildings with glass-enclosed porches. On the Friedrichstrasse, there are curtained restaurants, knickknack and porcelain shops, even a shop devoted wholly to gardening—a commercial extravagance unimaginable, say, in Poland. But even here commercial life seems sporadic, the streets unnecessarily wide, as if built with unfulfilled expectations of importance.

East Berlin seems to be a city waiting for an identity to be imposed on it. The same is true of East Germany as a whole—formally known as the German Democratic Republic (G.D.R.). Until the upheavals of the last few months, the G.D.R. had presented itself to the world as a completely new phenomenon: a German nation without a past. Its elderly communist leaders, who in fact opposed Hitler, claimed that the people they led had also been part of an imaginary mass German opposition to Nazism. In exchange for loyalty to the new German communist identity, East Germans were thus offered an exemption from history.

The creation of an innocent communist Germany was an attempt to will into being German moral normalization. A Germany without a past could function without self-consciousness and had no need for acts of atonement. Unlike West Germany, therefore, the G.D.R. refused to pay reparations to the Jews. In the Auschwitz museum, among the pavilions devoted to nations victimized by the Nazis, one is in honor of the G.D.R.

The East German pretense of moral innocence is now over. As the slogans being chanted at opposition rallies insist, the Germans, both East and West, are one people, one nation, with one future—and, though left unsaid, one past.

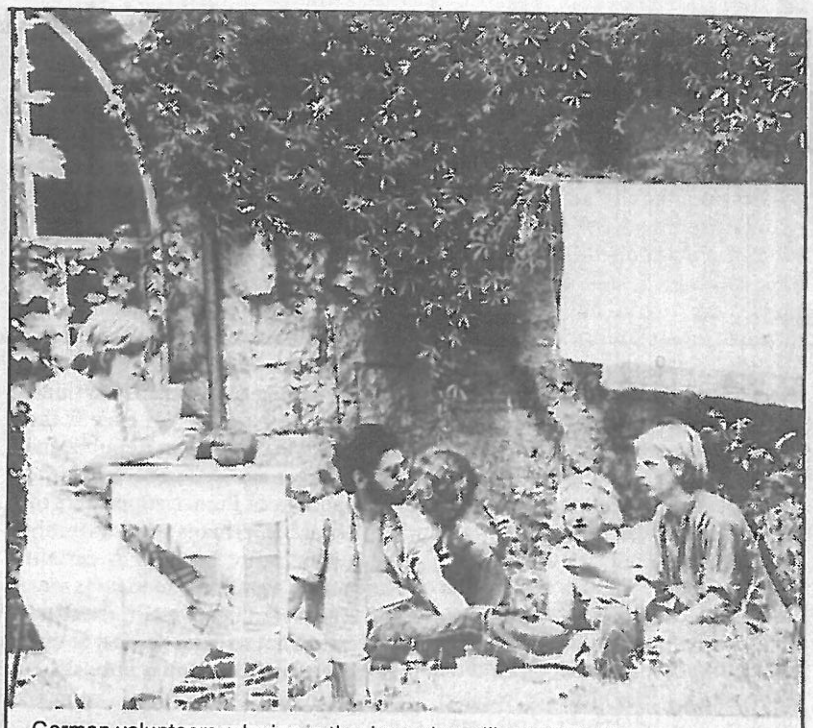
Those slogans are a kind of ironic vindication for the G.D.R. branch of Aktion Suhneizechen, Action for Reconciliation, which has insisted on East German responsibility for the Nazi past. For many years, Aktion Suhneizechen was considered superfluous by the G.D.R. authorities, even spiritually subversive: what were East German citizens trying to atone for?

The East Berlin office of Aktion Suhnezeichen is located on a grey narrow street not far from the Berlin Wall. Dr. Stefan Schreiner, a youthful 42-year-old man with short black hair and black-framed glasses, is a long-time activist and member of Aktion Suhnezeichen's board. He is also East Germany's first and only professor of Jewish Studies, a field he had to invent for his country. He has lobbied for more Holocaust education in East German schools and has written letters to the government, together with other Aktion leaders, urging G.D.R. recognition of Israel.

Though he readily acknowledges that East German identity is based on historical distortion, and though he doubts whether he himself shares an East German identity at all, Schreiner wants to maintain a separate G.D.R. and opposes unification with West Germany.

He says: "The Germans never proved their readiness to confine themselves to their own economy and borders. They were never able to preserve neutrality or peace when they felt themselves to be strong. If there is unification, the Germans will try to win economic dominance over other nations.

"I hear among East Germans an attitude of contempt toward Eastern Europe, especially Poland. It is amazing to me that on the 50th anniversary of World War II, the legitimacy of Polish borders is being questioned by Germans—publicly, not only in pubs anymore. I fear this German arrogance will be demonstrated against our neighbors, not militarily, but in other ways, to show our neighbors' inferiority."



German volunteers relaxing in the Jerusalem village of Ein Karem.

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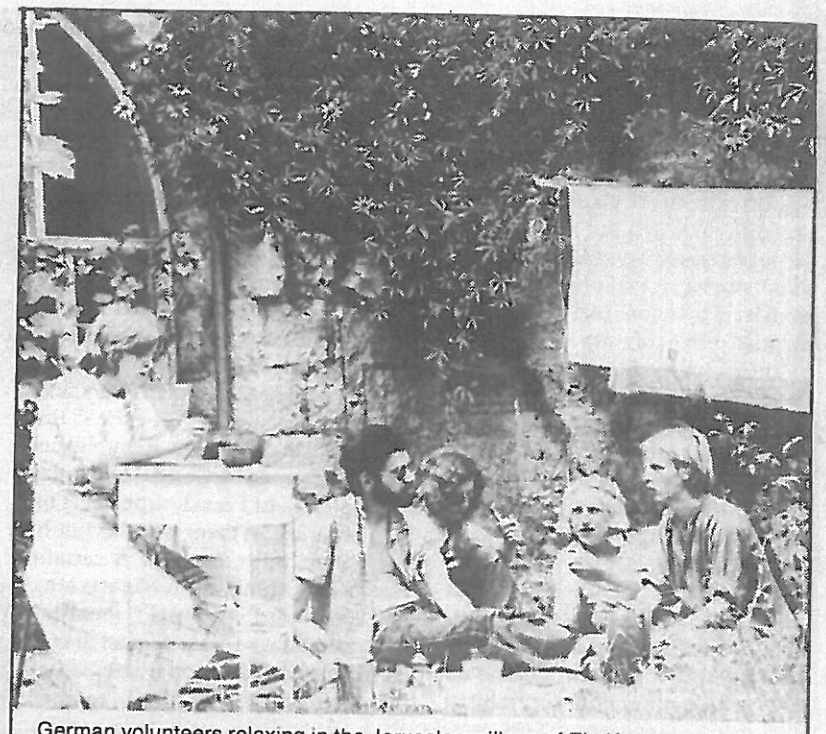

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Even if Germans manage a benign reunification, free of fantasies of national grandeur, Schreiner would likely insist that his fears are still justified. For, however unintentioned, reunification will almost inevitably create the conditions for German domination. The Germans are simply too competent: West Germany has created one of the most powerful capitalist economies, while East Germany came close to being the only nation to actually make communism work. A united Germany, Schreiner insists, would be unable to avoid economic mastery, and with it, the temptation for political dominance.

sacrifice unification for the sake of European stability and peace."

No other nation has been asked to make so altruistic a sacrifice of its own unity, for the stability of its neighbors. But if the Germans do manage to defer their legitimate dream of reunification for the sake of peace in Europe, that would be a reparation for the upheavals Germany has created in the past. Such a political gesture would offer decisive proof that the Germans have indeed changed, and can be morally trusted.

Kristallnacht Warning

Fifty years after the beginning of World War II, most Germans want to finally put the guilt of the past behind them. Germans strolling on West Berlin's Ku'damm a few weeks after the Wall opened saw posters advertising a play called, *I Wasn't There, Adolf Hitler Was There.* Though meant to be a satirical critique of German attitudes toward the Nazi past, those words could have been the theme for the Ku'damm's celebration of German normalcy. They implied the absolution not only of those Germans who really "weren't there," but of the entire nation: it wasn't Germany, but only Adolf Hitler, only a few madmen at the top.

But the harder the Germans seek to escape the past, the more it seems to pursue them. When the Wall was opened on the night of November 9 and Germans celebrated their victory over totalitarianism, they were implicitly celebrating a triumph over their past as well. Yet the night of November 9 also happened to be the anniversary of the 1938 pogrom known as Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, Nazi Germany's first physical assault on the Jews. In both West and East Germany, it is Kristallnacht that is officially observed as the Holocaust memorial day: it was in that mass pogrom that the German people directly implicated itself in the Nazi government's attempt to outlaw the Jews.

"Imagine the confusion inside German heads," a Frankfurt Jew, a professor of education, said to me. "How can they ever get the normalization they crave if even the great celebration about the Wall can't be free of Kristallnacht?"

One man who is highly conscious of that dilemma in German identity is Martin Kruse, bishop of West Berlin and chairman of the Protestant Church's national council. Kruse is a friendly man in a three-piece suit and wire-framed glasses who can easily be mistaken for a doctor. He is known as a defender of minorities, a voice against anti-Semitism and xenophobia. On his card, his name is written not only in Latin but Chinese letters: a gift, he says smiling, from Chinese friends. It is, one senses, more than a whimsical touch, but a statement of his commitment to pluralism, a rebuke to German cultural self-obsession.

Last fall, on a trip to the U.S., Kruse sought out rabbis and Jewish theologians. He speaks wistfully of the dialogue that takes place between Jews and Christians in the U.S., and wishes there were a more substantial Jewish community in West Germany with which to pursue a similar dialogue.

Of all the people I met here who are sensitive to Germany's moral past, Kruse was the most positive about recent German developments. "We thought the Wall would be our fate for another 20 years," he said. "And imagine: the Germans managed to overcome it peacefully, without a single act of violence. I feel inspired by the unexpected democratic strength of the youth. It is a miracle for us."

Then suddenly he tempered his enthusiasm. "It is a good feeling between East and West Germans: that we belong together and are responsible for each other. But we are entering a period of instability, with many dangers. I am afraid of this new spirit of freedom turning into xenophobia. A new nationalism needs enemies. There is a growing hostility to foreigners in this society. The Jewish community here is a very sensitive indicator, and they feel a spirit of hostility is coming. The Church has a special responsibility to open minds and change attitudes."

Last year, on the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the Protestant Church, led by Kruse, issued this statement: "Those who planned and carried out this crime could reckon on the support, indifference or fearful silence of the majority of our nation. We are aware that the guilt of that crime will retain its power to bind us if we remain silent or try to suppress the memory."

In retrospect, those last words seem prophetic. On November 10, 1989, the day after the Wall was breached, Kruse appeared on television to address the nation. Though the celebratory mood among Germans was hardly conducive to reminders of the past, Kruse refused to suppress the memory of Kristallnacht. The joy of November 9, 1989, he told the Germans, cannot wipe out the memory of November 9, 1938.

"After the Wall opened," Kruse said to me, "there was a suggestion to change the name of one of streets to the 'Ninth of November.' But it is not possible to do that. Kristallnacht and the opening of the Wall are like darkness and light. But Kristallnacht is stronger."

I asked Bishop Kruse if he saw any religious significance in the confluence of the two events of November 9.

He said: "This is a very hopeful time. Not only for Germany, but for the world. We have to be very careful, especially now, not to repeat the mistakes of the past. On November 9, 1989, God gave us an opportunity, and also a warning." □