An American Anarchist in Berlin

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> FE note: Berlin is a city whose rich history rings with memories of anarchist martyrs who organized clandestinely against the Nazi and communist East German regimes, suffering tremendous repression. Since WWII, Berlin anarchists have been at the forefront of militant activities opposing the state and are known for their networks of communal, often squatted buildings.

The monument is massive, several football fields long, utterly symmetrical.

Facing each other across the length of the memorial are two huge carved statues: a kneeling Mother Russia in mourning and a Red Army soldier holding a child in one arm and wielding a sword with the other, a shattered swastika at his feet.

This is Berlin: bombastic, combative, humming with energy, steeped in history. Seven thousand bodies lie at rest under the Soviet War Memorial, only a twenty-minute walk from where I am staying. The memorial pays tribute to the more than 80,000 Soviet soldiers who died liberating the city from the Nazis in the 1945 Battle of Berlin.

I arrived in Germany's capital city in late August, tired and hungry after the nine-hour bus ride from Frankfurt. I'd impulsively planned this trip, a solo backpacking adventure through Europe, on a budget that would turn out to be much too small, but I didn't know that yet. I walked from the bus depot to the train station, thinking that I was in a city just like any other. But Berlin is an entity unto itself, and proved me wrong again and again.

In my five days there, I walked the length and breadth of the city, from early morning to late evening. One of the first things I noticed was that, in stark contrast to the United States, the cars are tiny, even the minivans, and the people, helmetless, ride bicycles everywhere. Not once did I see a traffic jam. The city is utterly flat and has no downtown; Mitte, the wealthiest neighborhood, where the embassies, government buildings, and historic memorials are concentrated, could be thought of as the city center. But there are no skyscrapers. Only the television tower in Alexanderplatz rises above the city, blinking into the night.

In the United States, highly-developed downtown cores radiate outward into endless suburbs. Here in Berlin, I am cut adrift in a strange low-density sea. There's nothing to orient oneself to; the city is an amorphous mass, a collection of neighborhoods, demarcated by shifting borders. I stayed with friends of friends in Treptow, a neighborhood sandwiched between the better-known Kreuzberg and Neukolln.

This area, formerly the poorest section of East Berlin, has long been home to a mix of immigrants and working-class Berliners, and like many other parts of East Berlin, is succumbing to a slow tidal wave of gentrification that began in the neighborhoods of Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg. The process is the same, it seems, whether one is in my hometown of Seattle or in Europe. Geographer Tim Butler calls them "marginal gentrifiers," otherwise known as artists, young professionals, and unconventionals, move into low-income neighborhoods seeking cheap rent. Cultural critics declare such neighborhoods the next place to be, thanks to the cool factor associated with avant-garde residents. Then the developers move in and the wealthy follow. Long-time residents and marginal gentrifiers are forced out into other neighborhoods, and the cycle begins again. Along the way the marginal gentrifiers are

blamed, but the process begins and ends with the pernicious forces of capitalism acting on a population to force changes resulting in higher profits for the wealthy, and further precariousness for those already living on the edges.

Berlin is an example of gentrification on a macro scale; the entire city was, for a long time after the wall fell, mostly an inexpensive place to live, but is now in the midst of a real estate boom. Foreign developers are buying up large tracts of the city and transforming them into high-priced apartments and condos.

According to Hamburg's Der Spiegel, "residential real estate prices in Berlin have risen by 32 percent since 2007." And in October 2014, Bloomberg quoted data from a German firm that found some areas of Berlin have seen rent prices jump by 30 to 40 percent. Berliners have long been vocal in their opposition to gentrification, with crowds in the hundreds and sometimes thousands turning out in protest, burning cars and breaking windows along the way. A law passing rent control measures is set to go before the German parliament soon.

The Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989, barely more than three months after I was born, but it still exists as a double line of bricks, set into the pavement, running through the entire city along the path of the wall. Even without a physical marker, you know when you cross that line since, oddly, the pedestrian crossing signals change, sometimes from block to block. In the former West Berlin, the man indicating that it's safe to walk looks much like he does in the United States. In East Berlin, he is like a cartoon soldier with a cap.

The knowledge of history induces a kind of double vision. In Berlin, over and over, I felt time fold over on itself. My trip became a study of walls. On my first day in the city, I wandered down the East Side Gallery, the longest surviving stretch of the Berlin Wall. It is covered in murals painted by international artists that invoke and memorialize the struggles of oppressed peoples. Scrawled across the murals are messages from years of people who have visited the Gallery. The two most common inscriptions? "Free Palestine" and "ACAB," the latter an acronym for "All Cops Are Bastards."

"Seeing the wall confirmed for me that we humans have a natural aversion to division–and an inexorable urge for liberation," I wrote that night on Facebook.

A few days later, I visited Checkpoint Charlie, once one of the best-known border crossings between East and West Berlin. Today, it is the very definition of a tourist trap, bordered by shops selling communist-themed nostalgia, with actors in World War II-era US Army uniforms available to pose for pictures.

But a few blocks away, the streets are deserted, and an unobtrusive memorial stands on one corner of an intersection. I went over to it and stood on the spot where in 1962, 18-yearold Peter Fechter was shot by East German border guards while crossing the militarized zone in an attempt to escape from the German Democratic Republic. He bled to death for two hours while guards on both sides looked on, until East German guards came and took him back into the GDR. He was one of the first of at least 136 people who were killed trying to escape East Germany.

Berlin is shaped by walls, but it is also shaped by resistance. From the people who died trying to make it to West Berlin, to the people who fought back within East Germany and risked the repression of the Stasi, the national secret police, this is a city that slides magnetically toward freedom. Today, squats dot the landscape and graffiti blooms across every open surface; unlike in the United States, where "broken windows" policing rules the day and graffiti is a scourge to be eliminated; street art here seems to be entirely left alone.

The squats are hubs of anarchist and anti-authoritarian communities. Paul Hockenos, in a recent Boston Review essay, "Zero Hour," writes that the fall of the Wall, "unleashed a groundswell of utopian energy and DIY zeal," in East Berlin as state enterprises collapsed and buildings were left open for squatters to claim. Today, there are squats across the city that host workshops, community meals, concerts, and other events. They are connected by StressFaktor, a website that maintains a directory of squats and a calendar of political and social events, and are often the rally point for demonstrations.

At first glance, in the bus depot, Berlin seemed like just another city. By the time I left, in the chilly dawn of a Tuesday in late August, I was in love. Berlin sneaks up on you, draws you in with history and expansive parks, speaks to you in graffiti and banners dropped from squatted buildings. It is a site of the most basic struggle that of the struggle of humans against physical and invisible walls.

The former has been torn down. The latter still exists, in gentrification and oppression, but if any city can dismantle those final barriers, it is Berlin.

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