

Berlin Death Rattle

A YANK CORRESPONDENT JEEPS THROUGH FALLEN NAZI CAPITAL.

German soldiers straggle by a Red Army tank before Brandenburg Gate, once a symbol of German victory.



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PARIS—This is being written in Paris, and it is very difficult to write such a thing here because Paris is in the ecstasy of its victorious Spring, its girls once more in billowing skirts, its trees green again, its streets sunning beneath blue sky.

But Berlin was different.

Berlin was wet and sad and the smoke of its fires boiled up to join clouds that hung low over the city and allowed a shrouding rain to drift down first on this block, then on that. And the sun fought through an occasional thin spot in the clouds, but its light was intercepted by the haze and the smoke. The effect was of the interior of a cathedral at dusk. It was weird, this view of the corpse of a city at midday.

This was two days after Berlin fell. From a deserted street came the rattle of an automatic weapon and the staccato echo with a metallic ring, and then there was quiet. Down the block somewhere men faced each other in the ultimate moment of decision by gunfire, and the efforts of attack or defense consumed them wholly. There was no physical sign of the men who fought. They were hidden.

Berlin, the capital city of Nazi Germany, had come to a violent end. Other cities may have experienced more destruction but none had borne mutilation with less grace. Berlin looked dead, and not only dead but desecrated. Its people, fearful and bewildered, wandered without purpose in its streets and the streets were befouled by the remains of a city devastated.

Along one mound of debris a family group—men and women—had formed a line and were passing bricks, one at a time, from hand to hand to someone who placed them in his own way, perhaps to brace a sagging foundation or perhaps only to stow them for future use at some place unseen from the street. Brick by brick, hand to hand, yet there was no expression on the faces of the group to indicate that they knew that

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what they were doing was ridiculous, past all hope, in the midst of their ruin. There was only a look of unutterable weariness, and their hair was wet in the rain.

Physically there was a great deal more to be said of the wreckage of Berlin than might have been said of the wreckage of Aachen or Essen or Cologne. In Berlin buildings still stood as they did in Essen. Streets were blocked by falling walls as they were in Cologne and the damp smell of decomposition was the same. And in Berlin, as in the early days during and after the taking of Aachen, there seemed to be fewer citizens of the city than there should have been.

But in Berlin there was an atmosphere of finale beyond even the poignant sense of defeat that the other German cities have engendered in their dying. In Berlin there was a feeling that here had ended not only a city but a nation, that here a titanic force had come to catastrophe. And there was no sympathy.

THE Russians were magnificent conquerors. They did the things a legion of Genghis Khan might have done if they had forced the surrender of this wonderful prize. They passed in informal review along *Unter Den Linden*, and an officer drove down the street and had his driver remove from each intersection the most famous street signs east of the Champs Elysees. Groups of officers posed before Berlin landmarks and photographers buried their heads in the black covers of portrait cameras to record them.

Russians swarmed along the *Tiergarten*—walking, riding bicycles, driving shrapnel-studded automobiles, riding the back of tanks which roared their powerful insolence past the shell of the Adlon Hotel. In the *Tiergarten*, a park bisected by an avenue called *Charlottenburger Chaussee*, a German fighter had crashed and its bulk was a masterpiece of humiliation—the humiliation of a defending plane flung back upon the ground it was sworn to defend.

Berlin, as we saw it from a jeep, was a series of impressions . . . the strange twisted mouth of a horse that had died by shrapnel, the brilliant grin of a Russian girl directing traffic as she flipped a salute with the pert grace of a wren flipping its tail, the parked cars in front of the *Reichstag* and the obviously important Russians who stood on the steps as conquerors.

There was the unceasing sense of powerful movement as the Russians explored this city which they had just taken, driving around with a boundless enthusiasm. There were Russians eating beside a chow wagon, and a soldier washing down his food with vodka. There were Russians in the square, dancing, and a band played. In *Unter Den Linden* were the bodies of civilians, the dust of their famous street like grease paint on their faces. And by Brandenburg Gate, in a small building that had spilled its guts inward on the floor, was an old woman, alone. She lay on the debris, trying to support herself on an elbow. She had stockings, but no shoes, on her feet. Her hair was gray, and the grayness of it matched the gray dust on her dress. The woman slowly moved her head from side to side, dying.

Beyond the gate, a few yards away, sat a Russian artist with his easel. His canvas showed a nearly finished work in oil, a painting of the gate with the small building as only an insignificant note in the background. Behind him stood soldiers of the Red Army, intent on his work, oblivious to all else around them.