BERLIN’S WINTER OF FEAR
BY COLLIE SMALL

A bleak, frosty morning in Berlin’s streets

The first snow came to Berlin in late November, but it melted quickly and it wasn’t until the first hard frost a few days later that winter really seemed to settle in the bones of the tumble-down city. Then, Berlin’s battered joints stiffened and its pace slowed ominously until, suddenly, nearly everyone was cold and afraid. This one, they told themselves, is going to be the worst winter of all.

We know, when the suffering was even worse, they were still talking about November. For some reason, known only to Germans, they couldn’t get it out of their minds. It was common gossip, for example, that suicides had shot up to a record high in November, and people seemed to get a vicarious pleasure out of comparing it with the wave of suicides that occurred when the Russians first entered the city. In their weary imaginations, suicides had suddenly become the logical index to all their troubles.

A woman in Zehlendorf, a suburb of Berlin, tried to explain it. “November is a gloomy, mysterious month,” she said. “It is a month of revolutions. There is something in the air that causes people to commit suicide. You can always tell what kind of winter it will be in Berlin by the number of people who kill themselves in November.”

As things developed, the lady was obviously indulging in the favorable German sport of putting new endings on the Götterdämmerung. When the actual suicide figures were totaled, November was the second lowest month of the year.

Berlin is a frightened, gullible city, and the November suicide rumor was a great deal like a lot of other rumors. Not long ago, there was a rumor that babies were being ground up for sausage, and nervous Berliners believed it. There was another rumor that young women were being murdered by a black-market gang and hung on hooks in an abandoned butcher shop. There was a third rumor, not quite so shock-
BERLIN'S WINTER OF FEAR

ing, that Russia had declared war on Turkey and that the United States had rushed troops and ships to the Darda-
nelles.

If they guessed wrong on everything else, however, they were right when they gloomily predicted that this winter would be the harshest winter they have been called on to face since they reaped the whirlwind. There is as much snow as there was last winter, and there is slightly more fuel. But there is little hope any longer that things are actually going to get better, and people have been steadily weak-
ened by chronic cold and hunger to the point where they are far less able to endure another winter, either physically or mentally.

Hunger and cold has taken the worst
toll. In many cases, otherwise normal Berliners have skidded mentally through a lack of food until their sense of discrimination is fuzzy, their objec-
tivity is clouded and their reasoning dangerously slow. Crossing streets, they are easily confused and fre-
quently wander uncertainly into the path of oncoming automobiles, or, worse yet, they wade aimlessly in the swirl of traffic, paralyzed with fear and indecision.

Industrial accidents have skyrocketed. In Berlin, with industry in Berlin going at top speed, there were 1,867 fatal accidents. In 1946, the last year for which complete figures are available, there were 3,542 industrial fatali-
ties. Berlin's total labor force is less than 15 per cent of the 1939 factories even operating.

An accountant confessed that he was frequently bailed out by simple col-
ses of figures. "It is utterly impossible in simple addition or subtraction often seemed like an advanced exercise in calculus. An optician complained that he couldn't find enough stock of glasses to keep up with the demand. A watchman think. "It is not inconceivable," a doctor said recently, "that a whole generation of mental incompetents is being spawned in Berlin.

Berlin school officials currently picked 41 boys at random, between the ages of twelve and fourteen, and found that: 22 had no blankets, 14 no bed linen, 7 no clothing, 21 no shoes, 3 no overcoat. Five of them got two warm meals a day, 28 got one warm meal, 8 got a warm meal occasionally, and 37 never got any breakfast. Of 34 school-
girls between fifteen and eighteen, the situation was roughly the same ex-
cept that 7 of the girls had contracted a venereal disease and 14 had slept with men to get food.

Since the quality and quantity of food available has a direct bearing on the incidence of tuberculosis, it is hardly surprising that there are at least 12,000 new cases of "open" T.B. Each open victim, accor-
ging to generally accepted medical statistics, will infect ten new persons in a year's time.

In Berlin, a diet of 1,550 calories a day is still in effect with no prospect of an increase. Consequently, civilian subsistence in Berlin is still at the level which Herbert Hoover described as the lowest in a hundred years. As though that were not enough, part of Berlin's daily food allotment winds up in the black market, with a help-
Walter Freunz and his wife with 11 of their children, who live in four small rooms. In winter they usually huddle together in the kitchen to keep warm.

These six pairs of shoes are worn communally by the Freunz children. The family also shares a single cake of soap a month. Its combined income is $12 a month.

ful showe from corrupt food officials. The result is that well-fed, bespattered black marketers gather nightily in their chosen rendezvous to joust with caviar and filet mignon while other Berliners are toiling at sweat on boiled roots and mice, assuming they are lucky enough to find the former and clever enough to trap the latter.

Anything to Satisfy Hunger

Cats and dogs disappear regularly, and when a horse collapsed and died in its traces on a Berlin street, housewives charged out of their kitchens with knives and cleavers flying. Some Berliners have even been reduced to eating boiled nettles, and, it has been reported, a kind of fungus that attaches itself to peat, in the ground. Others supplement their ration with garbage, though they have been warned against rooting through waste piles since they almost always become violently ill. It is officially a dreadful choice—to eat garbage and get sick, or to leave it alone and endure the torture of a constantly pleading stomach.

Begging is forbidden, but pride and lawlessness are both forgotten virtues, and some Berliners literally live on Allied doorstep. One American housewife had 19 such callers in one day. To keep a slice of bread or a chocolate bar from going into the black market, most housewives now make the recipient take a large bite out of it before leaving the premises, thus spoiling any resale value the food might have had.

Fuel is another problem. Last year, people tore the seats out of subway trains and dug up coffins from cemeteries to sell. The situation is almost as desperate, although the fuel ration has been increased slightly. Unfortunately, nearly every home in Berlin suffered some war damage, and even a normal part war supply of fuel now would not be enough with which to keep warm, say, a house without windows.

Several months ago, a number of Old Magazine Articles.com
BERLIN'S WINTER OF FEAR

caskets were stolen from the bank vault of the Garrison Kirche, a old, splendid church housing the mortal remains of nearly 200 Prussian officers, some of whose proud ghosts could be heard in the night with Frederick the Great. When authorities investigated the thefts, they found the bodies of the dead warriors sprawled grotesquely on the stone floor in rusted sawdust and had been rifled on their caskets literally stolen out from under them. But somebody in Berlin had a new fire in his stove.

Unfortunately, Berlin's ordinary dead must also suffer. From the spring of 1945 until last September, most Berlin undertakers used caskets with false bottoms for funeral services and actually sold the neatly folded black sacks in order to save the caskets for other funeral services. Shocked city officials tried to stop the practice by abolishing the rationing of wood for coffins but with little effect. The order has been generally effective, some false-bottom caskets are still being used. One undertaker was even apprehended renting regular coffins—for funeral services only— at 40 Mark per week, five times the legal cost.

To get more electricity than is allowed legally, there are 1,001 ways to "beat" a meter, Berliners know every one. A common self-make-up operation per family per month is roughly 18 kilowatt-hours, enough to run an electric refrigerator for perhaps two weeks, and the penalty for careless overtime consumption is an automatic one-month disconnection plus a monumen-
tal fine of 100 times the cost of the electricity that was overconsumed. For deliberately setting out to cheat the system, Berliners are deterred.

Berliners are not deterred. Through the ingenious use of "oaksars," devices to beat the meters, a great deal more electricity is actually being used than is actually being registered. The simplest system is to pull out the wires and bridge the meter. Some Berliners, however, drill tiny holes in the meter covers and bend the wires to drag on the hands and slow them down.

In apartment houses, a favorite trick is to slip out into the hall at night, armed with a long extension cord, and plug into the meter. The building superintendent then is actually being registered. The simplest system is to pull out the wires and bridge the meter. Some Berliners, however, drill tiny holes in the meter covers and bend the wires to drag on the hands and slow them down.

In apartment houses, a favorite trick is to slip out into the hall at night, armed with a long extension cord, and plug into the meter. The building superintendent then is actually being registered. The simplest system is to pull out the wires and bridge the meter. Some Berliners, however, drill tiny holes in the meter covers and bend the wires to drag on the hands and slow them down.
BERLIN'S WINTER OF FEAR

ago, a paper hanger, for example, quoted a price of 70 marks to an American housewife for having a room papered, his theory being that he would also come away with several warm meals under his belt. This is why many Germans have settled for black-market trading. For a German housewife who wanted a similar job done, his price was too high.

The unlucky Berliners are the ones who have traded themselves out of all their possessions, and now have nothing left but their bodies. To the average American like Walter Preuss, who didn't have much to start with.

Walter Preuss and his family live in a kitchen apartment in the center of Berlin, in 82 Schönhauser Allee, in Prenzlauer Berg, a workers' district in the Russian sector of Berlin. There are ten sons and six daughters in the family, and two more are on the way. The family has two children, and is trying somehow to find clothes for the new child, although her present baby, now over a year old, has never had even a pair of socks on. For the 17 people in the Preuss apartment, there are nine single beds, iron cots which, through an adroit manipulation of the available space, are squeezed into three rooms, and 10 children each. The only other furniture is a chair and a table in the kitchen. The windows are small, and the family, and the kitchen most of the time since it is the only room that is ever warm. Worst of all is the overpowering smell. One piece of soap a month is not enough to keep 17 people clean.

Before the war, Walter Preuss was a common laborer, but now he is almost stoned deaf and blind. He cannot leave the house unless one of the children goes with him. Occasionally, he tries to mend shoes or mow lawns for his neighbors, but he is too weak to work. His family can't even go to school. Thus, the total income for the Preuss family is seventeen marks a month. They buy their butter for 2.12. The Preusses, of course, are worse off than most families, since the average monthly wage in Berlin is between 50 and 60 marks.

For breakfast, each of the children gets three slices of bread, once in a great while with a thin paste of fat. Lunch is an egg, a slice of bread, and a few pieces of vegetables, although the Preusses usually are able to buy a slicer of meat each ten days or so. Dinner is three slices of bread again.

German relief workers have the names and address of the Preuss family, and not long ago a young woman from a relief organization came to visit him. She stayed for nearly an hour, asking questions and poking through the dark, malodorous room. There were only one very bed and its 17 unwashed people. When we left, I asked her what she intended to do for the Preusses.

"Nothing," she said. "What can we do? There is no food, no fuel, no clothes. We can do nothing."

Misery, unfortunately, does not become Berlin. Berlin is still different when the flags flew and the bands played, but now something seems to have gone askew with the world. Berlin, and its people, are still true to the spirit of a city. Out of a few relief agencies, which are almost completely hamstringed by shortages, no one seems willing to help anyone. In fact, for everyone, the battle for survival has deteriorated into such a vicious free-for-all that, for sheer meanness, Berlin is unim
surpassed by any other city in the world. If Berlin had a crest now, it would undoubtedly depict two Berliners at each other’s throats with a knife, Berliner making off with their overcoats.

Under the Nazis, informing on relatives, close friends, and neighbors was a popular pastime, but it is more popu-
lar now. There is no explanation for it other than that some Germans seem to enjoy informing. The police immediately reports him for stealing. If he looks too costumed, he is apt to be reported for looking too costumed. If, on the other hand, he looks too uncostumed, he has a good chance of being reported for looking doolike. None of it makes sense.

A Nazi Party Book Racket

Not many months ago, an enterprising citizen was convicted of running a Nazi party books and selling them to people interested in having their friends arrested as unreconstructed Nazis. It was quite a new twist when it was revealed that the custom was to have your friends arrested for not being Nazis. In any event, it was a simple matter to buy a phony party book, insert the desired information, and mail it. If the forger was discovered, he had put a con-
siderable number of party books into circulation, and a lot of bewildered Ber-
liners were having a terrible time trying to stay out of jail.

In the same charitable spirit, three German children recently went to the Army’s Recruiter at the Fair Div. in the American sector of Berlin, to re-
port confidently that their father was hiding gear for the Nazis. The startled father, of course, immediately found him-
self being prepared for the inquisition, while his three children observed the proceedings with  impartial interest. Fortunately after a long search failed to uncover the alleged hoard, the C.T.D. released the man, and his children confected. They had apparently witnessed the termination of it.

As opposed to informing, which is simply personalized revenge, professional spies involve information that is car-
ried on by each of the four powers in Berlin, although there is precious little information to be gained from it that cannot be gleaned from the stenographers’ newspapers. Virtually all the agents are Germans who spy for and on the Rus-
sians, British, French, Americans and, of course, on each other.

Some of the spies, particularly those engaged by the Russians, are coerced into the work, and the Russians are believed to be operating a sort of graduate school of espionage at Zeessen, a few kilometers outside Berlin in the Russian zone. Other German spies are required by their profession to satisfy personal grudges against one or more of the occupation powers. Most of them, however, are ex-
temperament employed in occupations that generated only in the extra rations or special privi-
eges that go with their jobs. Were it not for the fact that it is some-
what disconcerting to employ a Russian, particularly, entertaining such a monu-
mental distrust of everyone else in Berlin, the spring that goes on might be even further strained. Actually, it is intended to be a very solemn busi-
ness, but the attempts at intrigue so far have left a skinning of the public com-
edy of errors that no Hollywood picture would dare portray.

Being Germans with no special fear for the integrity of their employers, most of the agents are notoriously unreliable. A ridiculous amount of infor-
mation is shared among the agents, irre-
BERLIN'S WINTER OF FEAR

spective of which they pretend to be serving. Some spies even work for two or three powers at once. Moreover, what in- formation these agents deliver is usually worthless. One Russian spy was apprehended in an American office in Berlin, stealthily making off with a Con- gressional Manual, the latest US military guide as though he were carrying the plans for Napoleon's retreat from Moscow.

Not so funny, however, are the mys- terious disappearances of Berliners from their homes or offices. More than 3,000 men have vanished in recent weeks. The communists' strongest opposition, have been whisked off into the Russian zone and nothing more has been heard from them. German bankers in Berlin American offices periodically disappear without a word. They simply go out to lunch and never come back. The result is that nervous Berliners, already afraid enough of the Russians, are literally frightened out of their wits by a knock on the door or a tap on the shoulder.

Unfortunately, they can expect little protection from Berlin police who, under a rather complicated arrangement, are headed by a Britisher but under the command of an erstwhile soldier of fortune who was captured by the Russians at Stalingrad and spent part of the war in Moscow as a member of the French Committee headed by Romanus.

The Russians Keep Him in Power

The Americans, British and French all would like to be rid of Magraff, who has already been presented with a string of vices of the city to be executed very prom- inently, but there is a powerful joker in the Berlin city constitution that permits the Russian-appointed mayor, as a villein in the Kommandantur, the quadrupartite control authority for Berlin, and the Russians are obviously quite fond of Magraff.

The whole police force, in fact, is wondrously corrupt, and Berlin police men, to judge from the roster at the Ringstrasse Jail, comprise some of the most active thieves in the city. Crimes of vio- lence are committed with no more fre- quency than is to be expected in a comparable size, but there is a staggering amount of stealing, whether by profes- sional criminals, amateur criminals or the lawless in general.

From a humanitarian point of view, it is impossible not to be in sympathy with the plight of the hungry, cold Berliners. But unfortunately, it is not quite so easy to feel sorry for someone who obviously feels sorrier for himself than you do. Primitive though the world may be, have a greater capacity for self-pity, we encumbered by reason, than the people of Berlin.

A group of German doctors displayed this fatal weakness several months ago when, in a statement notable for the vast amount of chauvinism crammed into it, they lamented that their grateful patients were, in effect, being slowly and surely destroyed by a lack of attention on their part to the medical powers. "The German people, once enterpris- ing and diligent, has been deprived of its vigor and initiative," the doctors said. "We think it is the task of all of us, our doctors, to succeed us in the international competition, have lost all their strength through the lack of calories and proteins. The people under the rule of poets and philosophers," is now blind to all other interests but those concerned with the fulfillment of their egoistic inter- ests. A dominating sense of guilt has been supplanted by envy, jealousy and a quarrelsome temper.

"We, the German physicians, feel our- selves called upon to fight not only for the whole world that the things happening
here are the very opposite to the education for democracy promised us. What we are now witnessing is the destruction of the spiritual and physical substance of a great nation, and nobody may discharge responsibility unless he does everything in his power to save and help."

It was an interesting statement. In 1942, when the German "poets" and "philosophers" were winning, one Hermann Goering told German occupation officials in the countries that had been overrun: "You have not been sent there to provide for the well-being of the people under your supervision. This eternal worrying for other people has to stop once and for all. If you tell me that those people will have to go hungry, I am not touched one bit."

The End

Collier's for February 21, 1948