

# BERLIN'S WINTER OF FEAR

BY COLLIE SMALL



*A bleak, frosty morning in Berlin's streets*

*Barely existing on brief rations of food, fuel and other necessities the three million-odd Germans in Berlin are cold and afraid. In their battle for survival they spy on one another, steal coffins from the dead for firewood and raid garbage cans to eat*

**T**HE 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.

Weeks later, 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 favorite 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-



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

If they guessed wrong on everything else, however, Berliners guessed right when they gloomily predicted that this winter would be the hardest winter they have been called on to face since they reaped the whirlwind. There is as much food now 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 weakened by chronic cold and hunger to the point where they are far less able to endure another winter, either physically or mentally.

Chronic hunger 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 objectivity largely gone, their reactions dangerously slow. Crossing streets, they are easily confused and frequently wander uncertainly into the paths of oncoming automobiles, or, worse yet, stand fatally entranced in the swirl of traffic, paralyzed with fear and indecision.

Industrial accidents have skyrocketed. In 1938, 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 5,342 industrial fatalities in Berlin, and those with less than 15 per cent of the 1938 factories even operating.

An accountant confessed that he was frequently baffled by simple columns of figures and that a problem in simple addition or subtraction often seemed like an advanced exercise in calculus. An optician complained that he could no longer muster enough concentration even to be sure of making the correct change in eyeglasses for his customers. Teachers in Berlin schools find they have to hammer constantly at their pupils to make them think. "It is not inconceivable," a doctor said recently, "that a whole generation of mental incompetents is being spawned in Berlin."

Berlin school officials recently 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 shirt, 21 no shoes, 37 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 except 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 persons in Berlin with "open" T.B. Each open victim, according to generally accepted medical statistics, will infect ten new persons in a year's time.

The food ration 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-



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Walter Preuss 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 Preuss children. The family also shares a single cake of soap a month. Its combined income is \$12 a month.

ful shove from corrupt food officials. The result is that well-fed, bespatted black marketeers gather nightly in their chosen rendezvous to joust with caviar and *filet mignon* while other Berliners are dining at home 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 obviously 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 lawfulness are both forgotten virtues, and some Berliners literally live on Allied doorsteps. 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 get wood, and this year 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

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caskets were stolen from the bunk vault of the Garrison Kirche, a old, splendid church housing the mortal remains of nearly 200 Prussian officers, some of whose proud ghosts could boast of having fought 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 sabers and rotted parade uniforms in 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 buried the dead in grisly black sacks in order to save the caskets for other funeral services. Shocked city officials tried to stop the practice by allotting a ration of wood for coffins but while 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 marks for five hours.

To get more electricity than is allowed legally, there are 1,001 ways to "beat" a meter, and Berliners know every one of them. The average ration per family per month is roughly 18 kilowatt-hours, enough to run an electric refrigerator for perhaps two weeks, and the penalty for careless overconsumption is an automatic one-month disconnection plus a monumental fine of 100 times the cost of the electricity that was overconsumed. For deliberately setting out to cheat the ration, the penalty is jail.

Berliners are not deterred. Through the ingenious use of "oskars," devices to beat the meters, a great deal more electricity is being consumed 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 insert thin 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 building maintenance circuit, which registers on the landlord's meter. The best system of all, however, is to do as one Berliner did, before he was caught—keep everything in the house going all the time, and at the end of the month stop the wildly spinning hand at the point on the meter where it is supposed to be after thirty days.

Food, of course, remains the most important commodity, but almost any article has some value to someone, somewhere. There are times when the whole of Berlin seems to be on the prowl, coursing through the streets with brief cases, handbags and knapsacks. Occasionally, the police check the contents and turn up a surprising variety of goods, including guns, firewood, cigarette butts, bread, and, in one peculiar instance, a brief case full of manure.

### Prefer to Work for Americans

For Berliners clever enough to live by their wits, life on the whole can be bearable. The luckier ones are the ones who are able to work for Allied nationals, preferably Americans, who can pay them in warm meals and cigarettes for services performed. Many Berlin tradesmen, having found a good thing, are reluctant to do work for fellow Germans, who must pay in worthless marks. Not long



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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 and a store of cigarettes for black-market trading. For a German housewife who wanted a similar job done, his price was 400 marks:

The unlucky Berliners are the ones who have traded themselves out of all their possessions, and now have nothing left for bartering. They would be Germans like Walter Preuss, who didn't have much to start with.

Walter Preuss and his family live in a kitchen and three rooms at 82 Schönhauser Allee, in Prenzlauer Berg, a workers' district in the Russian sector of Berlin. There are ten sons and six daughters, one of whom, the eldest at twenty-one, is married to Hans Hanisch, a transport worker, and lives elsewhere in the city. She is going to have a baby soon, 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 shoes.

For the 17 people in the Preuss apartment, there are nine single beds, iron cots which, through an adroit manipulation of human bodies, can hold two or three children each. The only other furniture is a chair and a table in the kitchen. The windows are mostly cardboard, and the family stays in 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 stone deaf and it is not safe for him to leave the house unless one of the children goes with him. Occasionally, he tries to mend shoes, repair bicycles, or fix windows in the neighborhood, but how many people in Prenzlauer Berg have shoes, or bicycles, or even windows?

One of the Preuss sons works as an apprentice locksmith at 40 marks a month, and another is a delivery boy for a tailor, who pays him 80 marks a month. Most of the other children are too young to work, and due to the shoe shortage some can't even go to school. Thus, the total income for the Preuss family of seventeen is 120 marks a month, which, at the military exchange rate, is \$12. The Preusses, of course, are worse off than most families, since the average monthly wage in Berlin is 130 marks, or \$13.

For breakfast, each of the children gets three slices of bread, once in a great while larded with a thin paste of fat. Lunch is a warm meal consisting mostly of vegetables, although the Preusses usually are able to buy a sliver 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 called on them. She stayed for nearly an hour, asking questions and poking through the dark, malodorous apartment with its nine dirty beds 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. It was different when the flags flew and the bands played, but now something seems to have gone askew with the abundant German spirit. Outside of a few relief agencies, which are almost completely hamstrung by shortages, no one seems willing to help anyone else. Instead, it is every man for himself, and the battle for survival has deteriorated into such a vicious free-for-all that, for sheer meanness, Berlin is un-



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surpassed by any other city in the world. If Berlin had a crest now, it would undoubtedly depict two Berliners at each other's throat, with a third Berliner making off with their overcoats.

Under the Nazis, informing on relatives, close friends and neighbors was a popular pastime, but it is even more popular now. There is no explanation for it other than that some Germans seem to enjoy informing on other Germans as an investment in future benefits which might somehow accrue from it. A man walks into his house carrying a log for his cold stove, and a jealous neighbor immediately reports him for stealing. If he looks too contented, he is apt to be reported for looking too contented. If, on the other hand, he looks suspiciously doleful, he has a good chance of being reported for looking doleful. None of it makes sense.

### A Nazi Party Book Racket

Not many months ago, an enterprising citizen was arrested for forging Nazi party books and selling them to people interested in having their friends arrested as unreconstructed Nazis. It was quite a switch from the old days, when 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 name in it, "find" it lying about somewhere, take it to the police, and have the unfortunate victim hauled up as a new Hitler. Before the forger was discovered, he had put a considerable number of party books into circulation, and a lot of bewildered Berliners 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 Criminal Investigation Division, in the American sector of Berlin, to report confidentially that their father was hiding gold in his house. The startled father, of course, immediately found himself being prepared for the inquisition, while his three children observed the proceedings with great curiosity. Finally, after a long search failed to uncover the alleged hoard, the C.I.D. released the man, and his children confessed. They had done it just for the hell of it.

As opposed to informing, which is simply personalized revenge, professional spying on the international level is carried on by each of the four powers in Berlin, although there is precious little information to be gained from it that cannot be gathered simply by reading the newspapers. Virtually all the agents are Germans who spy for and on the Russians, British, French, Americans and, occasionally, other Germans.

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 Zeesen, a few kilometers outside Berlin in the Russian zone. Other Germans apparently have taken up the profession to satisfy personal grudges against one or more of the occupation powers. Most of them, however, are extemporaneous spies and are interested only in the extra rations or special privileges that go with their jobs.

Were it not for the fact that it is somewhat disillusioning to find the Russians, particularly, entertaining such a monumental distrust of everyone else in Berlin, the spying that goes on might be even funnier than it already is. Actually, it is intended to be a very solemn business, but the attempts at intrigue so far have fizzled into a grimly pathetic comedy of errors that no Hollywood B picture would dare portray.

Being Germans with no special regard for the interests of their employers, most of the agents are notoriously unreliable. A ridiculous amount of information is shared among the agents, irre-



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spective of whom they pretend to be serving. Some spies even work for two or three powers at once. Moreover, what information they do manage to pick up is usually worthless. One Russian spy was apprehended in an American office in Berlin, stealthily making off with a Congressional Directory and a U.S. Postal Guide as though he were carrying the plans for Napoleon's retreat from Moscow.

Not so funny, however, are the mysterious disappearances of Berliners from their homes or offices. More than 5,000 members of the SPD party, the Communists' strongest opposition, have been whisked off into the Russian zone and nothing more has been heard from them. Germans working in 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 Paul Margraf, 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 Free German Committee headed by Von Paulus.

### The Russians Keep Him in Power

The Americans, British and French all would like to be rid of Margraf, who has already been presented with a stinging vote of no confidence by the city assembly, but there is a powerful joker in the Berlin city constitution that permits the Russians to exercise their familiar veto in the *Kommandatura*, the quadripartite control authority for Berlin, and the Russians are obviously quite fond of Margraf.

The whole police force, in fact, is wondrously corrupt, and Berlin policemen, to judge from the roster at the Ringstrasse Jail, comprise some of the most active thieves in the city. Crimes of violence are committed with no more frequency in Berlin than in any other city of comparable size, but there is a staggering amount of stealing, whether by professional criminals, amateur criminals or the police themselves.

From a humanitarian point of view, it is impossible not to be in sympathy with the plight of the hungry, cold Berliner. But unfortunately, it is not quite so easy to feel sorry for someone who obviously feels sorrier for himself than you do. Probably no people in the world today have a greater capacity for self-pity, unencumbered 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 announced that the German people were, in effect, being slowly and surely destroyed through a lack of attention on the part of the occupation powers.

"The German people, once enterprising and diligent, has been deprived of its vigor and initiative," the doctors said. "Frank and strong-minded men, once fit successfully to join international competition, have lost all their strength through the lack of calories and protein. The people once described as one of 'poets and philosophers,' is now blind to all other interests but those concerned with the daily bread. Constructive cooperation has been supplanted by envy, jealousy and a quarrelsome temper.

"We, the German physicians, feel ourselves duty bound to point out to the whole world that the things happening



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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 disclaim 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

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