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The Eighth of May

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Mr. Peter Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire

Dear Peter:

Forty years ago, on the 8th of May 1945, the German army capitulated and the war in Europe was over. Although two years ago I might have been able to tell you the year when that happened, I would certainly have had to look up the exact month and day-- after all, this happened before I, and indeed the majority of Europeans, was even born. But after the barrage of publicity, demonstrations, celebrations, official commemorations, and military displays that have filled the past three months here I doubt if there are many people in either of the two Germanies who couldn't give a detailed historical sketch of the last months of the war.

We've all had to read about it, hear about it, and watch the war replayed blow-by-blow in the original newsreels, recent documentaries, and films, over all five East- and West German television channels. On the 8th of May itself, the war even bumped "Der Denver Clan" (i.e. "Dynasty") from the television schedule, the last straw for some people. We all know what happened to Hitler, but this season's sordid details of life among America's rich remain to be told.

Even though they both gave ample attention to the fortieth anniversary, however, there were fundamental differences between the GDR's approach and that of the Federal Republic. In the first place they really weren't commemorating the same thing. The GDR was celebrating "the liberation of the German people from Hitler fascism by the armed forces of the Soviet Union." West Germany was remembering the end of eight years of destruction, and the beginning of post-war prosperity.

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That difference is best expressed for me by the contrast between a poster I saw several times in East Berlin, and the speeches made by West German politicians during Reagan's visit. The poster portrays the familiar theme used in the GDR throughout these fortieth anniversary events, a soldier in uniform, with helmet, carrying a child on his shoulder. The words in the poster translate as "Thanks to you...for our liberation." The full sense conveyed by the original slogan, "Dank euch...", is a little difficult to express; it sounds a bit like one of those sentimental greeting cards that you can never imagine yourself buying. And it's extremely difficult to believe that there were very many Berliners on May 8, 1945, who were saying "Dank euch" when the Soviet troops "liberated" them from the German army.

West German Chancellor Kohl's final speech during the Reagan visit, and a speech given later by West Germany's President von Weizsacker to the Parliament expressed a very different point of view, a view that's probably fairly close to the consensus in the Federal Republic. They said that May 8th is no day to celebrate for Germans, but a day to mourn. They did extol the great friendship between Germany and the former Allies, but they never suggested that they were grateful to them for defeating the German army in 1945. The gratitude and friendship came later, when, as von Weizsacker put it, the former enemies became friends. That was also when the money to rebuild Germany began to flow in. There's not much mention of the Soviet Union in the West German speeches, as it wasn't a contributor to the Marshall Plan. In fact, it was running its own "reverse Marshall Plan" in eastern Europe after the war.

GDR publicity was just the reverse, because its purpose was to commemorate the "winning of the war." And the war was won, according to them, by the Soviet Union, with bit parts played by the Americans and the British and walk-on roles by the Yugoslavs and a few others. I grew accustomed to hearing that view of history in Hungary, particularly since the Hungarian television uses so many Soviet films, and nearly all of them seem to be about the war. But the GDR always carries things a step farther. Another prominent poster during the past few months depicted, in simulated three-dimensional realism, a hammer-and-sickle smashing a swastika. The Hungarians are considerably more restrained. Maybe when you've been liberated more than once it begins to lose its novelty.

The regimentation of the East German celebrations also

made West Germany look like a seething ferment of democratic pluralism, although in contrast with other western countries it's always seemed to me that West Germany has a rather narrow political spectrum. The sniping between the two major parties, the C.D.U. and the S.P.D., over how each one was respectively handling this anniversary, and the predictable (and unfathomable) boycott by the Greens, were tantamount to a virtual state of anarchy by contrast with the GDR. Political controversies are resolved more privately there; in public they march together. (In this year's Mayday parade they all marched with children on their shoulders.) But underneath the highly visible divergence between the two Germanies, there may be more unanimity of opinion than one immediately perceives. This week the West German news magazine Stern, reporting on a recent poll of 18-to-20-year-olds in the Federal Republic, found that a large majority of youth do see the 8th of May as a day of liberation rather than as a day of defeat, and that this proportion has increased in the past few years. It would be interesting to compare that finding with a similar East German statistic, but the GDR doesn't publish opinion polls.

The greatest virtue of the GDR in these events was that the official celebrations there reached a crescendo much earlier, and were mostly over by the evening of May 7th. In the West, even though the news media were filled with the war all winter, the official commemorations really began a few days before May 8th, and the news media are carrying on strong with the news of 40 years ago, on and on through the spring of 1945. So the silence from the East is now a rather welcome relief from the continuing onslaught of post-war news from the West.

Sincerely,



Bruce Hall