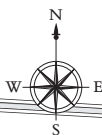
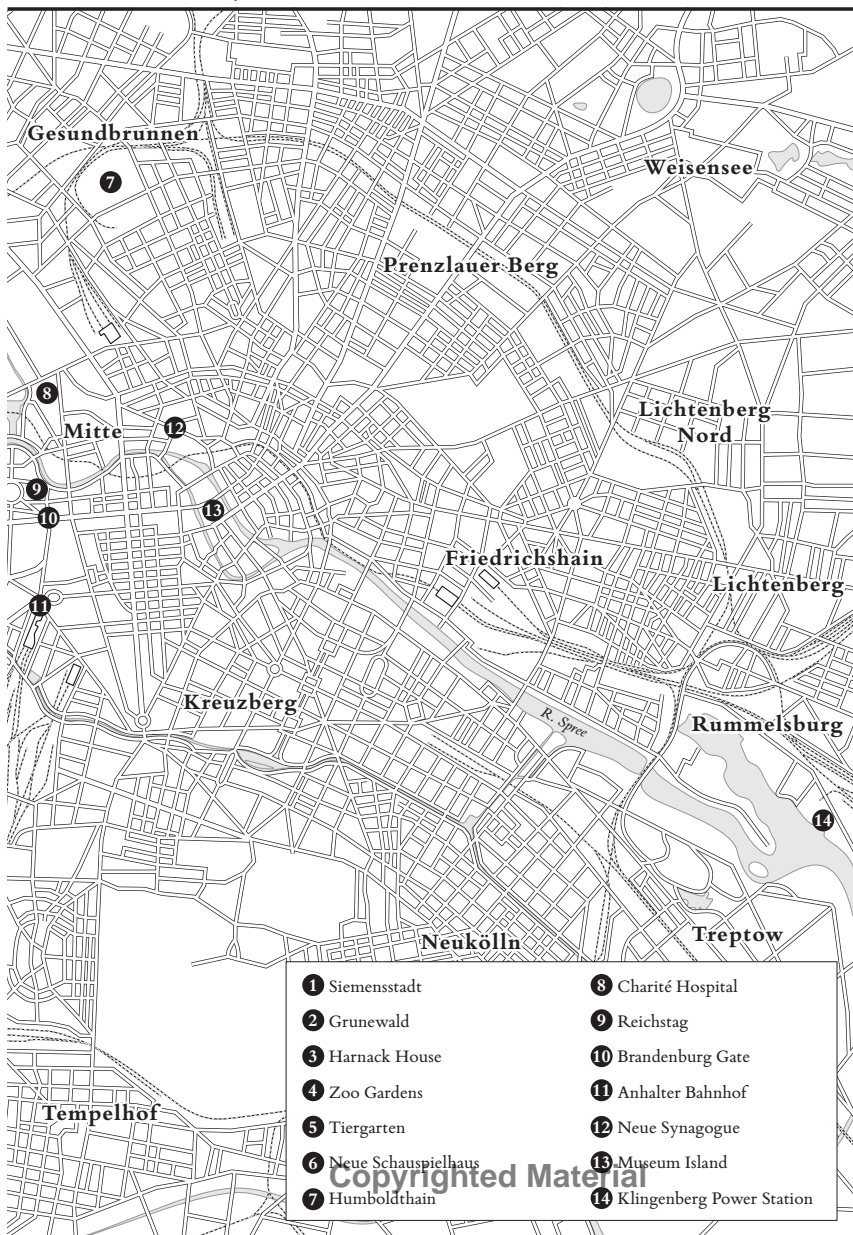


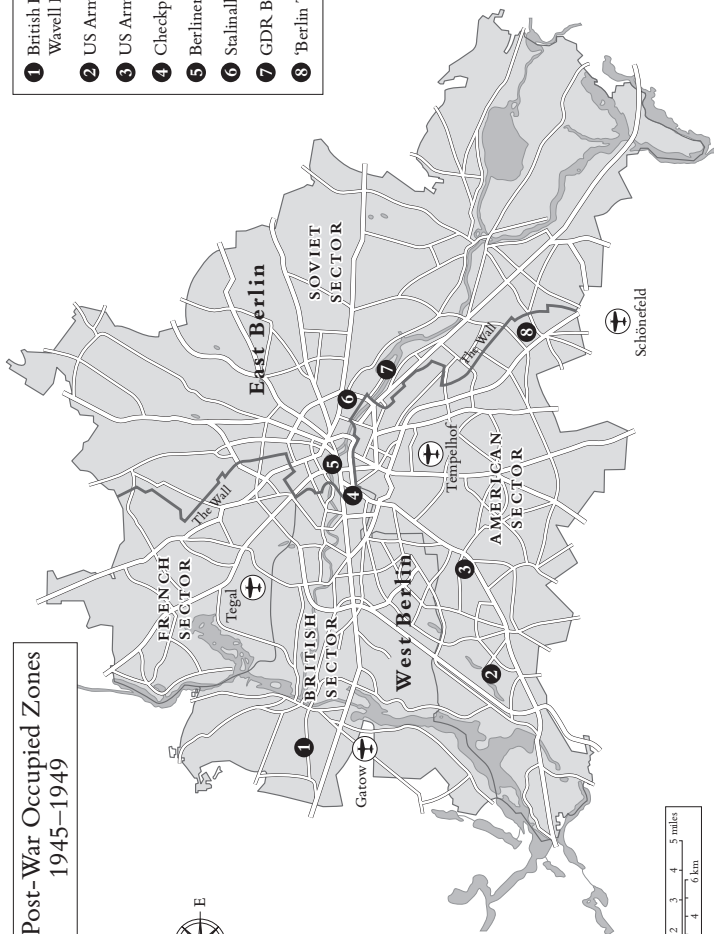
Berlin
1919–1945





The Post-War Occupied Zones
1945–1949

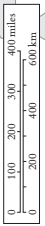
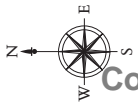
- 1 British Forces Base, Wavell Barracks, Spandau
- 2 US Army Barracks, Zehlendorf
- 3 US Army Barracks, Steglitz
- 4 Checkpoint Charlie
- 5 Berliner Ensemble Theatre
- 6 Stalinallee
- 7 GDR Border Guard
- 8 'Berlin Tunnel'



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Berlin in Europe Post-War 1945

- The Iron Curtain
- Warsaw Pact states
- NATO states
- ▨ Other communist states
- Neutral states



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Preface: 'Every city has history, but Berlin has too much!'

Berlin is a naked city. It openly displays its wounds and scars. It wants you to see. The stone and the bricks along countless streets are pitted and pocked and scorched; bullet memories. These disfigurements are echoes of a vast, bloody trauma of which, for many years, Berliners were reluctant to speak openly. In the shadow of filthy genocide, it was taboo to suggest that they too were victims in Hitler's war. The city itself is long healed, but those injuries are still stark: the old Friedrichsruhe brewery wall with a sunburst blast-pattern caused by heavy shelling; the bas-relief at the base of the nineteenth-century Victory Column, of Christ on the cross, pierced by shrapnel through the heart; the entrance portal to the bomb-crushed Anhalter railway station – Romanesque brick arches – now standing alone and leading only to empty air. In the Humboldthain, a rich park just north of the city centre, trees spring forth around a grim, vast, concrete fortress that, towards the end of the war, served as shelter, hospital and catacomb. Most famous is the shattered church tower, capped with metal, that stands over the busy Kurfürstendamm shopping street: the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. The tower is almost all that remains of the turn-of-the-century original; one night in 1943, it was hit in a bombing raid and engulfed in flames (and, after the war, a new hexagonal modernist church was constructed next to it). If you knew nothing of the history of this city, the initial sight of this strange tower would be disconcerting: what could be meant by this weird ruin preserved in the midst of an indifferent shopping concourse? Other European capitals acknowledge the dark past with elegantly aestheticized monuments; they seek to smooth the jagged edges of history. Not here.

Throughout the twentieth century, Berlin stood at the centre of a convulsing world. **Copyrighted Material** Unpermanently scanned and haunted the international imagination. The essence of the city seemed to be its sharp duality: the radiant boulevards, the cacophonous tenement blocks,

the dark smoky citadels of hard industry, the bright surrounding waters and forests, the exultant pan-sexual cabarets, the stiff dignity of high opera, the colourful excesses of Dadaist artists, the grim uniformity of mass swastika processions. And with the advent of the Nazis came a steadily building drumbeat of death. Of the city's Jewish population, most of those who had remained in Berlin under the Nazis – 80,000 people or so – were deported and murdered between 1941 and 1943. In addition, an estimated 25,000 Berliners were killed by Allied action in the final weeks of the war in 1945. But there was a continual proximity to fear, before and after, too: for anyone born in Berlin around the year 1900 – and who was then lucky enough to live on into the 1970s or 1980s – life in the city was an unending series of revolutions; a maelstrom of turmoil and insecurity. This spanned the reeling trauma of the First World War and the disease and violence that immediately followed; the sharp, vertiginous inrush of modern industry and the defiantly revolutionary architecture that mirrored it, roaring through once familiar streets and workplaces; the nausea of steep economic plunges, bringing destitution and hunger; then, the Nazi supremacy, the psychosis of genocide and the fires of war; and, finally, the heart of the city rent in two by competing ideologies. At the centre of these traumas were those weeks at the end of the war in spring 1945 when the devastation visited upon Berlin and its people was comparable to the infernal retributions of classical antiquity.

The city does not lack for heartfelt tributes to the dead: the exquisite and recent Holocaust memorial, a maze of monoliths that rise further over your head the deeper you move among them, is one of the few sites where the nervy pace of the Berliner is forcibly slowed. A few streets away from here is the much older, pale-stoned neoclassical Neue Wache memorial, built in 1818 in the aftermath of years of terrible European conflict. In recent times its purpose has been widened, and it has been transformed into a striking hall of commemoration to 'victims of war and dictatorship', the light pouring down through a circular hollow, or oculus, in the roof. But, for Berlin, the singular cataclysm of Hitler's war and the destruction wrought upon the city can never be easily memorialized. In the spring of 1945, as the Americans and the British fought through Germany, and as their bombers shattered ever more streets and

tenements, turning homes to ash, and the vast Soviet forces closed decisively around the city, their screaming projectiles piercing the air, ordinary Berliners were prisoners facing inescapable horror. It was carnage for which the world had no pity. The city became a battleground that spoke of the final obscenity of total war. The tokens of civilization were crushed into dust, and Berliners were forced into a scavenging existence that strained at the threads of human nature.

And there was a further element of anguish in 1945, one that transcended the bombs and the mortars that left unburied bodies beyond recognition, the epidemic of suicide as thousands of citizens chose to end their own lives rather than submit to an enemy that filled them with terror, even the wholesale rape in literally uncountable numbers that created decades of family trauma across the city. It was the fact that these violations and cruelties were regarded by the implacable wider world as being understandable – a final whirlwind of vengeance as unstoppable as nature itself. The Nazi leadership had inflicted agony and death upon millions across Europe. Berlin's once-substantial Jewish community was terrorized for years before being expelled and exterminated. So how could their Berlin neighbours presume to tell the world that they too had suffered atrociously? This atoning silence left a bewildering cloud of moral ambiguity over the city. How total was the totalitarianism of the Nazis here?

The fall of Berlin in 1945 is one of those moments in history that stands like a lighthouse; the beam turns and sharply illuminates what came before and what came after. It was not just the squalid death of the man at the centre of the maelstrom, or the way in which his self-destruction in an underground bunker appeared to seep out and dissolve the foundations of the city itself. Nor is it a story that can be wholly understood as military history, since it is also a vast tapestry of ordinary civilian Berliners – greatly outnumbering the remaining soldiers who could no longer protect them – and their efforts to cling to their sanity as their lives were dislocated. It is also the story of those who had seen the warning shadows of this violence in the years beforehand. There were older Berliners in 1945 who had been there in the aftermath of the Great War and the failed German Revolution of 1918; who had already edged their way down icy streets transformed into sniper-canyons; who had already known chronic food

shortages and unrelieved cold. In 1919, a poster appeared all over the city depicting an elegant woman locked in a tango with a skeleton. 'Berlin, stop and think! Your dance partner is death!' proclaimed its strapline. The poster, inspired by the poet Paul Zech, was about public health measures in the wake of war, yet it suggested a wider morbidity in the city's nature.

Similarly, the nightmare of 1945 threw its shadow far into the city's future. In the aftershocks of Nazism, those ordinary civilians faced new waves of post-war violence, of deprivation, of distress, and a whole new cycle of totalitarianism. The deathly grey of the Berlin Wall, upon which construction began in 1961, was itself part of the aftershock of 1945, as the city remained at the centre of global geopolitical anxiety, the potential flashpoint for a nuclear war. And yet even with this new iteration of duality, the wit and the art and the unselfconsciously defiant spirit endured.

People do not live their lives in fixed eras; an epoch ends, yet the people continue – or try to continue – much as they did before. The recent history of Berlin is often viewed through fixed prisms of division: Wilhelmine, Weimar, Nazi, communist, each period hermetically sealed. Yet the lives of its citizens formed an uneasy continuum through all these different regimes; these were people who always struggled hard to adapt to a city that changed with whiplash velocity. What must all of these violent revolutions have seemed like to Berliners who simply wished to live and work and love? Those who grew up in the Weimar era, who then felt the shadow of the Nazis fall, then in the years afterwards saw their city occupied and dominated by other powers – how did their mental landscapes, their memories of particular neighbourhoods, remain firm when the physical urban landscape around them was in a constant state of bewildering mutation and demolition, to the extent that even some born in the city could no longer find their way to once-familiar streets? Nor could these abrasively witty citizens ever be wholly defined by the nightmare of war; to explore their lives and their history now, it is important to acknowledge that their stories also encompass Berlin's extraordinary cultural hinterland: not just its wildly innovative and world-leading art and cinema and music, nor just its rich scientific endeavour, but also its tortured relationship with an ancient aristocracy and the constant grinding engines of class and street violence.

Before Hitler, this had been a cosmopolitan city, drawing fascinated visitors and immigrants from around the world. Among the smart apartment blocks and futuristic department stores of the 1920s moved artists with sensual and satirical visions of the new reality of city life. This exuberance would be almost completely (though never wholly, even under the Nazis) extinguished for a time. And immediately after May 1945, that flame jumped high once more, feeding on the oxygen of liberation. Then there was Berlin's pioneering pre-Nazi promise of personal fulfilment. For a time, women and men were relatively free to live according to their true sexual orientations. Here, unlike most other world cities at the time, they were not reviled; they could at last express the love that had been denied to them. Again, the Nazis did all in their power to smother this side of the city's life, and in the cruellest ways. A great many Berliners were sent to brutal deaths for this reason. Yet, out of the ashes, defiance reared, and the city rediscovered its taste for sensuality once more.

There was also a propulsion about the city's intellectual life. In science, as much as the arts, a range of new worlds were summoned in laboratories all over Berlin. Before Nazism, this had been Einstein's city, but he was not the only dazzling innovator. The mysteries of quantum physics were being explored here by minds that were operating in new and unimagined realms. The city's immolation in 1945 throws stark light on to the directions in which that science had travelled, and the lengths to which Stalin was prepared to go in order to steal its atomic secrets and make them his own.

The price of early twentieth-century innovation was insecurity and alienation; the sheer speed of the pace of discovery, and the pace of social, sexual and artistic change, was exhilarating for some, frightening for others. This gave Berlin a shifting identity that could not easily be defined. The city's unusual sensibility – apparent even amid the smell of death and the rubble of the Soviet invasion – had been noted previously. 'It has always,' wrote the poet Stephen Spender, 'been a city in which the psychology of the inhabitants was worn like hearts on sleeves.'¹ In 1930, the writer and satirist Joseph Roth wrote: 'Berlin is a young and unhappy city in waiting. It walked the streets of the east of the city, and said of Hirtenstrasse, a boulevard of severe apartment blocks: 'No street in the world is as sad.'² Yet, in 1920s travel

advertising, Berlin was labelled 'the new city of light in Europe'.⁴ It was noted in 1929 that 'there is no city in the world so restless as Berlin. Everything moves.'⁵ The internationally renowned theatre director Max Reinhardt had observed, before the rise of Nazism: 'What I love is the taste of transience on the tongue – every year might be the last.'⁶ Even in the pulsing neon lights that pierced the twilight autumn fogs, the possibility of darkness was always close. The artist George Grosz was preoccupied with 'the dark-walled tenements' and the imminence of 'riots and massacre'.⁷ And after the war, when Berlin was racked between new occupying powers, that sharp sense of urban alienation was compounded, and artists such as Bertolt Brecht were among those who probed these tears and fractures. Both in the communist east of the city and the American-dominated western zone there was a resurgence of molten aesthetic energy. And, as with the period after the First World War, it was blended with something feverish and giddy and on the edge of ungovernability.

Berlin today is wonderful for the aimless walker; its apparent lack of any readily discernible centre makes it fascinating to explore. You might be inclined to see the heart of the city lying at the Brandenburg Gate, and the restored Reichstag that stands beside it. But no: there is no huge sense of occasion or pomp, merely a sense that it is here that the business of government is conducted without fuss. Perhaps that heart is to be heard among the grave museums and the cathedral to be found on 'Museum Island'; among those neoclassical colonnades and domes? Again no: while undeniably alluring and attractively landscaped, these grand nineteenth-century institutions seem almost self-consciously out of place: there to impress visitors but bearing no architectural sign that they are a part of the city's everyday organic life. Perhaps the key is to be found in the story of Berlin's hideously persecuted Jewish community. Not far from here, a little further to the north after a walk along the banks of the Spree, is an exquisite building: the New Synagogue, its Moorish dome glowing in the golden sun. Yet it is a revenant; in 1943, the synagogue was half-destroyed, and, in the wake of the war, the gutted structure decayed and finally was demolished. The building that we see today is a deeply felt reconstruction. It is an important part of the story – yet not the whole of it.

The same can be said of another vast replica: the Berliner Schloss – an eighteenth-century palace raised for the Hohenzollern dynasty, seized during the 1918 German Revolution, largely ignored by the Nazis, pulverized by Allied bombing and demolished by the Soviets in the 1950s – has been born anew by the Spree, or partially so. Three of its four vast exterior walls have been perfectly recreated in their baroque splendour; and the building now hosts the Humboldt museum. Yet this recreation has caused immense controversy too. Its passionate critics have argued that there is something sinisterly neo-colonial about the deliberate reconstruction of the seat of imperial power. 'Every city has history,' observed leading Berlin architect David Chipperfield, 'but Berlin has too much.'⁸

But there is a quieter, more working-class enclave in the north-west – streets of glum and dusty-looking apartment blocks where, in a sense, something of the city's essential historic heart has been captured. It lies in the offices of a remarkable endeavour. The Zeitzeugenbörse – a contemporary witness exchange – has been aiming to capture and record the voices of ordinary Berliners from right the way across the century: their lives and experiences through the traumas of the decades. The old sense that the German people had to suppress their own experiences of suffering had the unintended effect of creating a mass of historic dark matter: silence and obscurity when it came to certain epochal events. The wonderful academics and volunteers who run the Zeitzeugenbörse have been working in recent years to ensure that a generation of Berlin voices is never lost. It is these voices that can help guide us through a century both of terror and of stubborn fortitude.

And they can also bring vivid, haunting perspectives: for instance, from the memories of Helga Hauthal, a Berlin schoolgirl in the 1940s whose innocent obsession with the cinema brought her into conflict with unyielding authority; to Horst Basemann, a young Berliner on the eastern front in 1945 recalling his boyhood, and the intoxicating night-time forest bonfires of the Hitler Youth of the 1930s; from young office worker Mechtild Evers, who, in 1945, in her efforts to escape an oncoming army ran into even more appalling jeopardy; to Reinhart Crüger, a twelve-year-old boy in 1941 who witnessed with horror the Gestapo coming for each of his Jewish neighbours in turn; and Christa Ronke, a young teenager who, like so many others her

age, had simply wanted to focus on her school studies even as the world around her disintegrated in 1945 and then, like her friends, somehow learned to suppress the trauma after the war as she sought to build a new life in this torn landscape.

While the reigns of the powerful are always closely recorded, the ordinary lives that were rocked and pitched by their actions and ideologies have a flavour and texture that perhaps tells us more about morality and human choices. And such matters have a particular resonance in Berlin: because of the close proximity of evil to all their lives, these citizens became especially fascinating. What happened in Berlin, and in the rest of Germany, might have happened anywhere, but how did those ideologies – the unyielding, cold-eyed brutality of fascism and the panopticon repression of communism – come to flower so fully here? And how did their repercussions continue to be felt throughout Europe and the West right up until that extraordinary night in the autumn of 1989 when the Wall – that final expression of totalitarian oppression – was at last breached?

In this sense, you cannot understand the twentieth century without understanding Berlin. Fundamentally, it was the moment of the city's fall at the end of the war in 1945 that encapsulated the nihilist horror: mass death without meaning on an unimaginable scale. Yet even in that miasma, it was still possible to discern sparks of the city's restless and impatient ethos. To walk the city now is to feel all those layers of the past. With great sensitivity in recent years, the authorities have made it possible to appreciate the different ideas of the city as it was. What the climactic darkness of 1945 teaches is that even as the shadows thickened, there were still Berliner lives and loves and dreams that spoke to the city's truer soul.

PART ONE
Dissolution

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I. The Dwellers in the Dark

They were living their lives either beneath the ground or deep within concrete. They were buried. Somehow, this was endurable. Across the city of Berlin there were a thousand or so specially constructed air-raid shelters, but these could accommodate only a fraction of the city's population of just under three million. There were also the basements beneath apartment blocks, cellars beneath houses and the stations of the U-Bahn underground system. There were even slit trenches. Subterranean passages – prospects of rough concrete enlivened by angry propaganda posters – offered comfortless sanctuary. Civilians crammed too close together gazed up at curved ceilings or at one another; and they blinked at each muffled boom above that reverberated with a resonance that could be felt in the bones.

By the first week of April 1945, the rhythms of civilian life in Berlin had been sharpened to a point of terrible simplicity: the daylight quest to find rations – any food at all – with silent, near motionless queues that could last for hours. The weary walks through wrecked streets in thinning-soled shoes smothered with dust, entire districts deconstructed and rendered unfamiliar, with new views and prospects and disorientating absences: the cumulative effect of months of heavy bombing. The previous month had seen an especially frenzied raid, as though the Allied bombers had been seeking simply to smash the city into the earth. Even so, in the suburbs there were some factories that had not been shattered by high explosives – worked by huge numbers of forced labourers drawn from across Europe – and that labour continued, albeit with intermittent supplies of electricity and water. The city's still-functioning power stations continued to hum, tall chimneys exhaling white smoke; the vast and architecturally elegant generating station of Klingenberg, which cast its shadow over the River Spree on the east of the city, was itself kept alive by intelligent forced labourers who were making shrewd calculations about the future of the city and about which of the Allies would be

the first to claim it. The U-Bahn was still, somehow, broadly functioning, though only on the lines that had not received direct hits, and strictly for those who needed it for work or military purposes.

With depressing frequency, the weary cry of the city's air-raided sirens, low and throaty, would begin the race back down to the underworld. Since the autumn of 1943, Allied bombing raids had killed and mutilated thousands, rendering entire streets and districts practically uninhabitable, although there were those who stayed among the ruins, unwilling to leave. Those citizens whose cellars and shelters had not imploded would emerge each morning into days that looked like night; the sky above grey and dense, sometimes 'smouldering yellow' with the dust and the ash.¹ The air itself seemed burned: unextinguished fires brought fumes from wood and paint and rubber. With handkerchiefs over mouths, mothers and grandmothers looked on as the civil defence authorities retrieved bodies – many in fragments – from beneath the grey brick and stone. Any individual death had lost its sanctity. Mass burials had been efficiently arranged, yet still a pervasive sweetness in the air signalled decay. Clearly, not all the remains had been recovered from the rubble. This was not for want of purpose; the firefighters and the police and other civic workers remained dedicated. Like the hospitals, though, they were overwhelmed. There were instances when ideology dissolved amid destruction. The small Jewish Hospital in the northern suburb of Gesundbrunnen – founded in the eighteenth century and the sole Jewish institution to survive the war in Berlin, chiefly because of its facilities and expertise – was, by the end of the conflict, simultaneously hiding Jewish fugitives and treating gentiles. By contrast, the central Charité Hospital, also founded in the eighteenth century – some of whose doctors had been used by the Nazis in the 1930s to carry out grotesque medical experiments and to euthanize disabled and psychiatric patients – was now extensively smashed; medical supplies and morphine were too sparse to minister to the processions of the wounded. Many in the city, familiar with the landmark of the Charité, did not comprehend just how close to their own daily lives the true terrible eugenic horror of the regime had been.

At the beginning of April 1945 American daylight raids subsided, but the nocturnal attacks by British bombers continued. Many Berliners who had lost their homes in these attacks were dwelling in

the shelters through the day and the night; for them, this life in the darkness must have seemed to be the limit of existence. The city's authorities had anticipated some years beforehand that Berlin might be in need of such sanctuary. Berlin is built upon sandy soil, so was always an awkward prospect for excavation, whether for sewers or for the underground railways that were constructed from the turn of the century onwards. In 1935 the Nazis stipulated that any new building in the city should be designed with a basement that could be used for shelter. The outrage of the first British bomber attack on the city in the autumn of 1940 prompted a 'Bunker Construction Programme for the Capital of the Reich'. By April 1945, and after eighteen months of sustained bombing from the Allies, a great many of those bunkers and basements had become sealed tombs. Entire streets had collapsed, punched through with thousands of pounds of heavy explosives, leaving infilled basements and passages beneath that rescue teams struggled to enter. One particular hazard that had faced shelterers was bombs hitting water mains; in that instance, their deaths would be caused by drowning, the waters rising to the brick ceilings too fast for them to escape. The U-Bahn stations were similarly vulnerable, the lines running only a few feet below the surface.

Despite such adversity, the keen edge of Berliner humour somehow remained present. The LS initials signifying *Luftschutz* (air-raid shelter) were said to stand for *Lernen schnell Russisch*, or 'Learn Russian quickly'.² The humour did not quell the fear. Since the beginning of the year, in days when the implacable Berlin frost gave the streets a metallic feel, the city had been teeming with exhausted and traumatized rural refugees. Some had come by rail; others entered the city wearily on roads, negotiating cobbles and icy tramlines, pointing westwards without final aim. They had fled their stolen farmlands in the conquered east, carrying with them the searing memories of those they had left behind who had not escaped the Red Army: the women who were raped repeatedly, many of whom had been later tortured and murdered.

Some Berliner civilians were aware – and fearful – that the vast Soviet forces now gathering in the distance and moving inexorably towards them had themselves witnessed Nazi-inflicted depravities and obscenities, keeping Soviet prisoners of war in open-air pens where an estimated three million or more had been deliberately

starved to death under freezing skies. And by August 1944, as they pushed out of Soviet territory and towards Germany, huge numbers of those Red Army soldiers would have read in their newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* a terrifying account of a camp in Poland called Majdanek, written by the soldier and poet Konstantin Simonov. His agonized descriptions of its gas chambers, and of the ‘thousands and thousands of pairs of children’s footwear’³ discarded there, had been among the first searing reports of these atrocities – so searing that some in the British and American authorities did not completely believe them. Rumours of what happened at the death camps had already reached Berlin. Brigitte Lempke, who was a schoolgirl at the time, recalled a classmate pulling her to one side and saying, ‘I have to tell you something, but you must never repeat it, or something very bad will happen.’ Slightly frightened, Brigitte agreed and her schoolfriend told her that her uncle, a doctor, had returned from the east. One night, when the girl was supposed to be in bed, she secretly listened to her uncle talking brokenly to her parents. He was crying, she said. He had seen ovens in which they were going to burn people. The girl offered a vivid simile: ‘just how bread is pushed into the oven, people are pushed into it’.⁴ It was an image Brigitte could never forget.

And for the Red Army, the nature of those they were seeking to defeat had found even sharper focus with the discoveries of Treblinka and then, in January 1945, of Auschwitz. ‘Liberation’ seemed too exultant a term for the rescue of living skeletons amid the obscene piles of dead bodies. They had also found several mass graves in haunted forests. These young soldiers needed little hardening against their enemy, although their Soviet superiors were initially insisting, through newspapers and radio, that these camps were the responsibility not just of a few Nazi officers, but of German society as a whole. They were emanations of the very nature of the Fatherland. The time would come as the Nazi regime collapsed when the Soviets would reverse this position, insisting that the German working people could not be blamed, but, until this monstrosity was defeated, the soldiers of the Red Army were left to wonder about the humanity of every German civilian they encountered.

The cycle of vengeance had a terrible velocity. In part, at the beginning of April, this was because of tensions between the Allies.

The American and the British forces, having fought their way through from the west, were poised to make the final swoop on Berlin. (The Allies had already long decided – with difficulty – upon the division of Berlin and the zones of the defeated capital that each would occupy; negotiations at the European Advisory Commission in London had been ongoing since the autumn of 1943, with figures such as US State Department diplomat Philip E. Mosely haggling with British and Soviet counterparts over ‘hastily pencilled lines’⁵ on maps.) Now, in the London *Daily Telegraph*, Lieutenant General H. G. Martin ventured that Hitler’s forces still had some ‘kick left in them’ and that that would prevent Marshal Zhukov’s Red Army getting close. He predicted that either the Americans under General Bradley or the British under Field Marshal Montgomery would be the ones to seize ‘Fortress number 2 Berlin.’⁶ The British prime minister, Winston Churchill, knew that the conquest of the city would finally extinguish the Nazi flame; but the Americans under the command of General Eisenhower had already silently ceded the race; and President Roosevelt, only days from his own death, and anxious about long-term US entanglement with Europe, was adamant that the race should go to the Soviets. This decision was communicated to Stalin through Eisenhower, and Stalin, perpetually paranoid, had simply not believed it. He himself had deployed a double bluff to his allies, saying that he no longer considered Berlin to be the highest priority before, on 1 April 1945, telling his senior commanders, Marshals Georgy Zhukov and Ivan Konev, that they must reach Berlin first. Zhukov, forty-eight years old, had been born and raised in a village seventy miles from Moscow. His was a rural, turn-of-the-century childhood in a wide landscape of birch and fast rivers, where dusty poverty was endemic but where there were vividly recalled consolations of fresh-caught fish and summer berries. In this sense, even though Zhukov had been carried and raised by the tides of Russian history and revolution, he was similar to the younger men and women now under his command (although many of these younger people had known the hunger – in some cases famine – caused by Stalin’s 1930s collectivization of farms and the oppression of Tsarist smallholdings). Latterly, Zhukov and his forces had seen their beloved lands devastated by the Nazis, and they were now

fired by a dreadful, ineluctable energy that held an image of Berlin at its core.

As the news of the Red Army brought by those German refugees who had escaped the violent retributions seeped osmotically among Berliners, there was an understanding that their own idea and image of civilization were shortly to face an unknowable reckoning. In this sense, the impulse to stay burrowed in the twilight of the bomb shelters was a rational response to the terrors of the world outside.

Not all shelters were subterranean. There were striking structures to be found on some street corners, or nestled deep among the trees of the city's parks. Some were simply anonymous concrete cylinders with sloping roofs, while others took on the shapes of the buildings around them, like offices or flats, yet their rough texture and their blank, tiny windows made them faintly uncanny. Some rose out of the sandy soil of recreational spaces, their entrances simply angled slabs of concrete. Inside were tunnels that would come to a dead end. In the northern district of Wittenau were two concrete bunkers some fifty feet high, square in shape and with simple arched doorways, that evoked even more macabre associations: they resembled grand family mausoleums. In the central Kreuzberg area there stood one of the more ingenious shelters: a huge, round brick gas holder, originally constructed in the nineteenth century, had been converted into the Fichte-Bunker (it lay on Fichtestrasse): walls had been thickened and the unlit interior, reaching up to six storeys, had been divided into 750 small chambers. It was supposed to hold 6,000 people. By the beginning of 1945 it was sometimes holding 30,000. Local Kreuzbergers were joined by helpless rural refugees who had made their entrance into Berlin just as the menacing hum of the approaching bombers could be discerned.

Given their shallow depth, the shelters on the U-Bahn network gave only an illusion of impregnability. Even though at Moritzplatz station there was a further layer of tunnels to be found below the railway, in February 1945 any feeling of security was pulverized in a blink when the station above was hit and thirty-six people were killed instantly.

And across those last eighteen months of the war, it was estimated that some 30,000 civilians had been killed in air raids. The eyes of hundreds of thousands of Berliners had in that time grown accustomed

to a world of catacombs, bare bulbs, rough wooden furniture, slop buckets. There were some, though, who could not contain their anger at what they considered the barbarous conduct of a bestial enemy, and the lives that they were being forced to lead. A little time before, photographer Liselotte Purper, who had worked with Goebbels's propaganda department, wrote to her husband Kurt Orgel, who was stationed east – one of the last letters he would receive before he was killed. 'Rage fills me!' she wrote. 'Think of the brutality with which we will be raped and murdered, think of the terrible misery, which the air terror alone is already bringing upon our country.'⁷

The majority of those taking shelter were women, many of whom had young children. Part of the exhausting dread inspired by the air-raid sirens was the speed at which unwilling children had to be hauled from their warm beds, dressed and hurried over to the nearest local shelter, sometimes in bulky prams. There was then the need to soothe frightened infants in the weird semi-darkness as the thunderous night rolled in. In the north of the city lay a grand landscaped park, the Humboldthain. It had been named in honour of one of Berlin's most distinguished historical figures, the pioneering eighteenth-century naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, who had sailed vast oceans in order to analyse the floral and geographic wonders of the world. In times of peace, this park had been a tranquil, flower-dotted contrast to the rough streets that surrounded it. Now it was a site that characterized the city's deep unease. Despite the fires from ceaseless night-time bombing raids and the depredations of desperate citizens foraging for fuel, there were still rich trees growing here, high against the cold grey skies. But there were stretches of the park lawns that had been cut wide open, trenches zig-zagging like lightning bolts, and looming over all was a vast, square concrete tower, some 200 feet high and wide, crowned with octagonal gun platforms. At night, the tower roof would be manned by teenage boys, with the sparest of training, pointing anti-aircraft guns impotently at the blazing skies. And inside was where the local citizens ran when the Allied bombers came.

The shape of the Humboldthain flak tower – one of three such structures in the city – was alien and yet disturbingly familiar. The concrete was brutalist but the narrow windows were suggestive of a centuries-old fortress. Its gloomy interior was suffused with the

common reek of humanity. Thousands had been gathering in these shelters on a daily basis across the last few months. Around twenty thousand at most should have packed into those grim storeys, but, in panic, many more pressed their way in. Familiar faces sitting on familiar benches and bunks were joined by strangers in dim, close-aired intimacy. The tower's low-ceilinged chambers and passages were lit with pale blue bulbs, which gave faces a ghostly pallor. The lavatorial prospects were basic and grim: composting efforts. In the keenest nights of that frosty spring, the vast walls, several feet thick, provided insulation but no ventilation, and the tiny windows were blocked off so that feeble lights might not be detected by the bombers. Along the walls were rows of basic, creaking bunks. To some, the very idea of unbroken sleep would have been satirical. And yet there were families here who had adapted to the new twilight life, leaving the fortress only in order to obtain rationed food. Many had seen their homes demolished under ferocious Allied bombing. The loss was not merely that of a secure roof and shelter but of the accumulated possessions that constituted family memory: the photographs, the old mahogany furniture, the porcelain and the dinner services, all tokens of a certain kind of stability and continuity. Those threads that linked these shelterers to the past were snapped. And this dark concrete tower was now home. Others used it more sparingly, in the most extreme of emergencies, when the bombers were close to the city. They knew it was not a healthy place to be. 'When the guns on the roof were firing,' recalled Gerda Kernchen, who was sixteen years old at the time, 'the whole building would shake, which was very nerve-wracking.'⁸

The mere fact of the building's existence – it grew in the skyline of the suburb of Gesundbrunnen in 1943, constructed using forced labour – suggested to a number of Berliners that the course of the war had shifted. By the frozen days of February and March 1945, with Germany's borders penetrated from east and west, it was an increasingly grim symbol of siege. In this, it was joined by the stark visibility of another flak tower looming over the city's zoo. In some ways, this shelter had an even more urban edge to it: the third floor – a similarly comfortless prospect of bare concrete – housed a field hospital. The facilities and the lights were sparse; one section was used as a maternity

ward. Even in the spring of 1945, babies were being born into this cold, war-ravaged city.

A flak tower that stood within the Friedrichshain, in the city's east, held a ferociously guarded secret: a great mass of art and antiquities taken from Berlin's Kaiser-Friedrich Museum and other galleries, as well as those stolen from Jewish owners. The art that was hidden in the Friedrichshain tower included works by Caravaggio ('St Matthew and the Angel', 'Portrait of a Courtesan') and Botticelli ('Madonna and Child with Saint John') among others and was almost ludicrously vulnerable. There had been a plan by the start of 1945 to find more secure refuge for the collection of paintings and sculptures in Pomerania (on the northern coast of conquered Poland), though the mercury-fast advance by the Soviets destroyed that idea. A potash mine at Schönebeck (a town about sixty miles to the south-west of Berlin) was the next possibility, but with every available man engaged at arms, and with every able woman working elsewhere, the inclination disappeared. And just weeks previously, after another of the city's museums was engulfed in the searing flames of incendiaries, yet more works had been placed in the Friedrichshain tower. By March, various museum directors had coordinated a new plan: mines at Grasleben (an area to the west of Berlin and close to Hanover) and Ransbach (in the west of Germany, close to Frankfurt) were to be used. Some of the artworks were packaged carefully and taken out of the city, past vast craters, and into the countryside beyond. The last of these convoys departed on 7 April, leaving many works behind.

Civilians poked around these discarded masterpieces truffling vainly for stored food, for, while the art treasures were being evacuated, the citizens were not. There had never been a suggestion of any concerted effort to find Berliners temporary sanctuary in the towns and villages outside the city. They were effectively prisoners within the city bounds; there was nowhere else for them to go. Conversely, a number of families had, within the last eighteen months, actually returned to Berlin. Among them were children who had previously been spirited away en masse by the authorities to hostels in clear-
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aired mountain regions. Many were impatient to return to Berlin, as were mothers and grandmothers who pined for the familiar landmarks of home even as those landmarks were vanishing.

The city was defended, even though the Wehrmacht was lethally depleted; since 20 March, Army Group Vistula – there to fight the oncoming Soviet forces – had been led by General Gotthard Heinrici, a fifty-eight-year-old veteran from a family of Protestant theologians, whose powerful Lutheran faith was distrusted by his superiors. Earlier in the war, angry disagreements with the hierarchy had led to a period of forced retirement; now, with the Red Army fifty miles east of Berlin, the rehabilitated Heinrici was tasked with stopping this vast force from successfully crossing the River Oder and sweeping onwards for the capital. While there were urban whispers circulating among sheltering civilians concerning potential new wonder weapons even more powerful than the V-1 and V-2 missiles that had been streaking through the skies above the Channel and causing devastation in London, Gott-hard Heinrici was perfectly aware that no such miracle was close. The previous commander of Army Group Vistula – Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler – had allowed himself to be removed from the position having proved haplessly inadequate. The man who had devised the structure for the Holocaust and the obscene means for ending the lives of millions had withdrawn to a private retreat at the Hohenlychen Sanatorium some miles to the north of Berlin, suffering from self-diagnosed influenza. In the city from which he had withdrawn, there were exclamatory public pronouncements issued through street loudspeakers, written by the Minister for Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. The minister was exhorting belief. In the early 1920s, Goebbels had understood Berlin as an ‘asphalt monster’ that made people ‘heartless and unfeeling’;⁹ the asphalt had divorced the Berlin people from their true Germanness; the city had been ‘asphalted by the Jews’.¹⁰ By 1926, he was Gauleiter – or regional Nazi Party leader – of the city: a position he retained until his death. In a sly and brilliant analysis of his use of language, the contemporary philologist Victor Klemperer charted Goebbels’s shifting attitudes to Berlin; how the conflict between ‘soil and asphalt’ became tempered and romanticized to the point in 1944 when Goebbels could declare that ‘we have great respect for the indestructible rhythm of life, and the rugged will to live demonstrated by our metropolitan population’.¹¹ In the matter was limited.

It was also the case that many Berlin citizens were very quietly expressing their own doubts about the new wonder weapons. Behind

these seditious whispers – shared with care in a city where fierce surveillance of public behaviour was still rigorously carried out by resident block wardens – lay the leaden coldness of understanding. There would be no reverse, no rescue. The teenage boys firing the rooftop guns enthusiastically but uselessly at high-altitude bombers were collectively known by the initials LH, which stood for *Lüften Helfer* (air helpers). Those civilians sheltering beneath them interpreted the letters differently (in the manner of *Lernen schnell Russisch*): they called them *Letzte Hoffnung*, or last hope. The joke had layers of rueful bitterness. Paradoxically, the oppressively secular society that had been fashioned by the Nazis since the mid 1930s itself stood on a framework of para-religious faith: it required absolute belief in the Führer, and in those who did his work. For this vision of Germany, and Berlin, to cohere, it took faith to believe that the state had the right to complete control over body and mind, and would then use this control to nurture and protect the people. It took faith to believe in miracle weapons. And in those shelters and cellars, the faith was dissolving. There were those who, like General Heinrici, had held on to their Christian belief despite all hostile government efforts to marginalize the Churches and the laity. Theirs was a faith that it was unwise to proclaim too loudly. If they prayed privately, it was in silence.

And yet there were others in the city – underground both literally and metaphorically – who were, despite the frenzy of extermination, holding true to older beliefs and communities. Despite the methodical deportation of the city's large Jewish population to Auschwitz and other death camps, there were a significant number of Jewish people, possibly 1,700 or so, who contrived to remain in Berlin, hidden. Astonishingly, they had survived. These came to be known in very closed, secretive circles as the 'U-Boats'.¹² Many of these Jewish people had been taken in by gentile friends and associates. Some were obliged to live much of their lives concealed in the almost permanent darkness of basements. One such was Rachel R. Mann, who recalled that she had been out the day the Gestapo came for her and her mother. When she got home, she was taken in by a compassionate neighbour; but in the winter and spring of 1943, as some Nazi functionaries grew ever more hysterical, she was compelled to stay in the cellar. '[The neighbour] brought me something to eat every day and

sometimes she brought me up to her apartment so that I could take a bath. I was down there until the end of the war.¹³

There was Marie Jalowicz-Simon, then Marie Jalowicz, who had been eluding the authorities since 1942, having dodged away from a Gestapo official one morning; later that day, when a postman attempted to deliver a letter to her, she simply told him that her ‘neighbour’ Marie had been deported east. This was scrawled on the envelope and seemed to seep through the city bureaucracy. She was soon to discover – wearing a jacket without a yellow star – that even though she came from a thoroughly middle-class background, the most kindness and generosity were to be found in the city’s working-class districts as she sought factory work.¹⁴ By the spring of 1945 she was sheltering in a small house in one of the city’s northern suburbs amid her fellow citizens, a tiny number of whom knew her true identity. She regarded these working-class Berliners as her saviours, and as the true spirit of the city. They understood the enormity of the crime that had been committed by the state, unlike, in Simon’s view, the middle classes, who had capitulated to Nazi philosophy. ‘It was, above all,’ she said, ‘the educated German bourgeoisie who had failed.’¹⁵

There were numbers of those ‘educated German bourgeoisie’ who would have argued that they had had no choice, that they did not deserve to share the collective guilt and that their nights spent beneath buildings, waiting for bombs to plummet through, were a form of purgatory or penance.

Racism and enthusiasm for eugenicist theories were not unique to inter-war Germany; such beliefs were so widespread in some circles as to feel natural as well as respectable (King George V’s personal physician Lord Dawson of Penn was just one of many British establishment figures who had an interest in eugenics, as did some prominent left-wing politicians). As these Berliners were forced underground by bombs, very few were reflecting on how their entire society had been poisoned by the obsession with racial superiority and degeneracy. It was still too close to be seen. For some, it would remain so, even after the war.

But as all these people, wealthy and otherwise, gathered their provisions – the **Copyrighted Material** quantities of rye bread and meat, and carefully harboured supplies of alcohol, from Merlot to brandy – there was a subliminal awareness that their Führer had also become a

permanent shelterer. While radio broadcasts shouted in various pitches of frenzy about the victory to come, and about the need for all citizens to defend their home, it was obvious that the Führer was not making public appearances. For so many who had seen their leader up close at rallies, there had been jolting moments of electricity when Hitler's eyes had met theirs – a sense that he somehow knew them, and had a strong bond with them. But, by spring 1945, the Führer's absence was breaking the mesmeric spell.

And very few Berliners would have imagined – even if they had envisaged a secret subterranean headquarters – the grim and extraordinary reality of the tunnels beneath the centre of the city. On the surface, in the garden of the Reich Chancellery, there stood a concrete cube with doors – one of several entrances to the complex. Once the visitor had got past the guards and the manically intrusive body searches, there was a circling descent down a spiral staircase into a world apart. At the bottom of those stairs, more guards, more doors: and then, within, a fuggy maze of tiny rooms and tiny passages, a labyrinth of rough concrete. Signs of hasty workmanship were everywhere: there were small puddles on the floor where water had dripped from the ceiling. To be found in that warren were sparse meeting rooms, kitchens, basic toilets and washing facilities, bedrooms and a telephone exchange. There were more stairs, descending to a depth of some forty feet beneath the ground, that led into an even more muffled underworld. This was where, on 1 April, the Führer had settled permanently along with his partner (soon-to-be wife) Eva Braun, their German shepherd Blondi and assorted puppies. His small study was carpeted, the walls hung with maps. The air conditioning whined noisily, like a vast trapped bluebottle. It wasn't especially effective. The atmosphere was close. Officials walked the corridors at all hours, and were summoned by their hunched leader at the most eccentric times. It was a world in which the Führer decided when was day and when was night; meetings with senior military commanders would be scheduled to start before midnight and sometimes would not finish before dawn. Amid all the concrete, time drifted without meaning. When these commanders and party officials slept, did they dream? In the privacy of these visions, did they share their Führer's waking delusions?

Elsewhere in the city, children were tormented with nightmares.

Nine-year-old Sabine K ‘slept very poorly’¹⁶ in her sheltering basement, as she confessed to her diary. She had dreamed that ‘a Russian’ had entered the cellar, and asked her ‘for water’. She had moved off down a corridor, which twisted and then turned into an unfamiliar passage whereupon ‘a yellow light’ shone and she was suddenly terrified to see a man with ‘Chinese’ features who tore off her coat and ‘touched’ her.¹⁷ Was this nightmare the result of Nazi propaganda painting the approaching enemy as ‘Asiatic hordes’?¹⁸

Remarkably, in all those Berlin basements and bunkers and cellars and underground stations and concrete towers that surrounded the bleak labyrinth of the Führerbunker in great concentric circles, the people did sometimes manage to find rest. The musician Karla Hocker recalled that there was quite another way of absorbing the atmosphere of the dank basement that she found herself in. ‘Strange atmosphere, a mixture of ski hut, youth hostel, revolutionary basement and opera romanticism.’¹⁹ She and her companions were suffused with the desire to sleep. For those out there under the open skies – the ever more fanatical SS and Gestapo and plain-clothed officers, gimlet-eyed for the smallest infringements of the Führer’s desires, poised to punish; and the very young teenaged boys upon the roofs of those grey towers, manning the anti-aircraft guns that filled the air with flashing fire – sleep was now a matter of submission to exhaustion. Tiredness, like hunger, was a permanent condition. Just a few months previously, all these Berliners – from the eldest shelterers to the youngest Hitler Youth army conscript – had been living a life that might have looked to others to be wholly normal: schools, cafes, concerts. They had accepted with remarkable speed the prospect of doomsday. Velocity was one of the key characteristics of this city.

This new subterranean existence had been noted a little earlier by a Soviet reconnaissance pilot, flying high over the east of the city. He had learned of Berlin as being characterized by vivacity and light, by the fires of foundries, by the seductive glow and modern neon of consumerism. What he saw now was a winter city of darkness; he saw trams motionless on empty streets, he saw vast factory complexes, shattered and blackened. He saw boulevards devoid of a single soul. What had become of this city of light?

2. The Sacrificial Children

These boys had been moulded in darkness, yet their spirits had never been wholly smothered. The regime had sought to control not only what they learned, but also their interior realms of make-believe. None the less, there had always been some spark of childhood ungovernability and imagination that lay beyond the power of the Nazi government. By the spring of 1945 the regime in Berlin was simply seeking to bring childhood to a premature end. Young teenaged boys were being corralled (or, in some cases, eagerly volunteering) for adult military duties. All were aware that they were facing the prospect of their own mortality. It was not an abstract fear; for some of these young boys, the terror was insurmountable, discerned all too easily on their faces. Others, like Alfred Czech, who would find himself as a twelve-year-old being presented to the Führer in Hitler's final days to receive the Iron Cross, somehow, horribly, believed that his role as a boy soldier was natural. 'As a small boy, I didn't reflect much, I just wanted to do something for my people,' he told an interviewer decades later. 'I didn't think it was insane to send children into battle. It was war.'¹ He was now a part of the Volkssturm – the people's storm. This was the physical expression of the 'people's war' – the conscription of all civilian males who had until then been, for whatever reasons to do with either health or occupation, exempt from regular military service. By April 1945 that net had widened to include boys whose voices had not yet broken. Nor were young girls – members of the League of German Girls, and themselves sometimes no more than twelve years old – excluded from the urban battlefield. Theresa Moelle, aged fifteen, was taught how to use the hand-held Panzerfaust bazooka. In the days to come, she would have to deploy it. Just as with the boys of the Hitler Youth, the possibility of her death was ever present. The macabre business of children – their co-optation as bodies to be hurled against the enemy – should have been one of the points at which natural Berliner scepticism hardened into

resistance. And, for many, it was; mothers standing in queues looked at armed boys – the sons of other mothers – and could not quell their revulsion at the idea of child martyrs.

Yet the landscape of the broken city around them seemed to exhale nihilism. Just a few weeks before April 1945, the bombers had brought all-consuming fire to the district of Friedrichstadt, which – unusually, in what was always a broadly unpretty city – had once presented an attractive and historic prospect of a popular ornate theatre and two grand cathedrals in the classical style, as well as a large marketplace that had drawn visitors since the eighteenth century. On top of this was the vast Wertheim department store – a turn-of-the-century marvel that for a time was the largest of its kind in Europe. The thousands of lethal incendiaries dropped by American bombers in one of the largest daylight raids conjured an inferno that came close to turning into a firestorm. Berlin's firefighters could do nothing; the flames roared for several days, reaching eagerly from building to building and taking hold. The spread was stopped only by the murky maze of Berlin's waterways, and the distance between the buildings on either side. In the years to come, the district of Friedrichstadt would hold the attention of the world as a grim borderland. In 1945, its erasure was just another physical manifestation of the undeniable truth of the war, even as fantasies of secret weapons continued to be believed in some corners of the city and in some corners of the regime. One especially unhinged figure was German Labour Front head Robert Ley: he was convinced that German scientists had perfected 'death rays'.² There was something in this that chimed with the imaginations of ten-year-olds.

In those early days of April 1945, the teenagers of Berlin were being organized by the older members of the Volkssturm, some of whom, with their gaunt faces and Iron Crosses from the last war, had a haunted dignity. For a few of the boys, it did not matter that some of the uniforms procured for them were bathetically large; nor that some of these uniforms were those of the SS, rather than the regular army they revered. Their understanding of what lay ahead was necessarily limited by their ages. The boys who were posted to the flak-tower anti-aircraft guns were in some ways as insensible as those down on the streets below who were being taught how to load guns

and bazookas, and who were being given swift training in the brutal realities of house-to-house fighting. It was not yet clear how long it would be before they were fighting to save their city, but it was understood by the boys that their own individual heroism would be called for. And there was little active resistance, because a generation of boys had become attuned not so much to the sinister nature of the Hitler Youth movement, but rather to the possibilities it had offered for escape, chiefly from the industrial poverty of Berlin's dreary suburbs. It had been this way since the early 1930s.

For Berliner Horst Basemann, who some years previously had joined his local Hitler Youth group, there had been something completely compelling about the weekends spent in the forests surrounding Berlin. It was more than simple bonding with the other lads; there was another element that reached rather further into his psyche. By the spring of 1945 he was a Wehrmacht prisoner of war, held east of the Urals, a young man in his early twenties blinded in one eye. It was at this point that he started thinking back over all that had seemed so natural to him, starting with his induction into the Hitler Youth in 1934. The mere act of being removed from the stifling, oppressive Berlin city streets had just been the beginning. As he recalled: 'In the evening we sit in a circle around the blazing fire. In front of us the lake is shimmering in the moonlight; behind us lies the forest.'³ The leaders were only 'two or three years older' than him. But also sitting near that fire was a specially invited guest: a middle-aged man, a former First World War soldier. 'We hear his experiences . . . We listen eagerly to his words and hear the tragic end of his story. We boys are rested, moved and quiet inside. We look into the twitching flames of the slowly dying fire.'⁴

Basemann continued: 'This former officer picks up the fanfare trumpet and blows a tune that we don't know yet. Then he says: "If one day the call rings out to you, dear boys, to wipe out the shame of Versailles, I am sure that you will be ready to defend our Fatherland, if necessary also give your life."⁵ This seemed the very opposite of morbidity; to young minds, such heroism, framed by these flames in the silence of the dark countryside, instead provided a form of inner exultation. The shame of defeat in the First World War and the manifold humiliations and consequences of the Treaty of Versailles – the

French and Belgian soldiers marching into the Ruhr in 1923 to seize coal and steel production, chronic nationwide poverty in part the result of reparations demands – could be overcome next to the bright fire, the sparks rising into the night. In addition to this were the songs that – at a distance – Herr Basemann recalled as being ‘strange’. He remembered scraps of lyrics: ‘If I should fall on strange earth – good-bye, that’s the way it should be’, and ‘the most beautiful death of all is the soldier’s death’.⁶

All of this took place far from parents, and from the watchful eyes of schoolteachers; and those who initially resisted their children’s induction did so precisely because they were frightened of the quasi-religious feel of the movement. Throughout the 1930s some Catholic families stood firm against their sons and daughters being pulled closer to those fires. Across the country the Hitler Youth was also, in its earliest years, unpopular with a number of working-class parents, who loathed the strict authoritarianism of the philosophy. Broadly, those who had been drawn to the idea fastest were the middle and lower-middle classes. In Berlin, though, there was a difference that led to a greater working-class enthusiasm for the idea: the possibility of escaping, if only for a short time, from overcrowded tenements and grim, treeless courtyards. Berlin’s poorer youngsters saw that the weekend camps on offer were free – good food, laughter, companionship and an unaccustomed sense of equality among boys from different areas and backgrounds.

Additionally, in Horst Basemann’s experience, the movement’s idea that ‘youth must be led by youth’⁷ did not seem to entail excesses. There was, however, a strong focus on military exercises. Quasi-parade drills were followed by intensive marches and runs across the leafy terrain of the city’s outer forests. The boys were taught the principles of map-reading and orientation. There were also rough battle games: teams formed, camouflage adopted, ambushes staged, team ribbons seized – and ‘any wounds were not cried over’.⁸

But the Nazis did not have complete dominion over these young urban imaginations. They found their heroes there too. Hollywood westerns, and any film starring Gary Cooper, had been hugely popular in Berlin throughout the 1930s (as had Laurel and Hardy, also

enjoyed by Hitler). There were also the science-fiction adventures of Flash Gordon (banned in 1941, just before the US joined the war, when in the syndicated cartoon strip Flash stopped fighting Ming the Merciless and turned his attention to fascism). Then there were the thrillingly sophisticated detective exploits of *The Thin Man* – a world of cocktails and daggers, brilliant deductions and gunpoint cliffhangers. But, most especially, there was a universal enthusiasm among these boys for the Wild West-based novels of a veteran German author called Karl May, whose cowboy hero creation was known as Old Shatterhand. The striking name came from this character's fierce fighting technique, which had damaged his own knuckles. Old Shatterhand's adventures, across a long series of novels, saw him righting wrongs and plunging into jeopardy across richly depicted prairies and deserts, together with his Native American sidekick Winnetou. It was fantastical, bloodthirsty stuff, packed with hazard and death – quicksands, crocodiles, hordes of hungry rats – and these novels held an all-encompassing grip on the German male imagination, even though their author had died in 1912 and had never set foot in America. Among Karl May's long-term fans were Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann and the artist George Grosz.⁹ Crucially, another devotee was Adolf Hitler, who had read the books feverishly throughout his Austrian boyhood and returned to them frequently as an adult. Albert Speer, one of Hitler's inner circle, once observed that the Führer, when discussing military strategy, mentioned 'Napoleon and Old Shatterhand in the same sentence'.¹⁰

Yet, for the boys of Berlin, these stories, combined with their exciting war games, were simply a portal into another dimension, offering 'magic nights in the open, under a purple moon and amazing stars that have a so much wilder lustre than in European skies'.¹¹ Many of them came from Depression-hit homes: unemployed fathers, the abrasive anxieties and anger of poverty. There was nothing abnormal about daydreams of heroism, which were shared across the world, but the Nazis found, by instinct, the most direct means of turning those boyhood daydreams to their own purposes: the evocations of Siegfried in the forest, augmented with material from real-life heroes who had fought in the last war and who had, as they saw it, been betrayed by real-life villains who now governed their affairs. It