

IN THE RUINS OF THE THIRD REICH

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I went to Berlin shortly after the Wall came down. The streets were glossed with drizzle and Christmas lights winked in shop windows. The rumble of the U-Bahn was beneath my feet.

Although the Wall had ceased to exist, it hadn't yet been dismantled. It cut through the heart of the city like a political razor and I made my way to Potsdamer Platz because the lady in the tourist office said that, soon, this wide swath of open space on either side of the Wall would become one of the largest construction sites in the world. Jackhammers would be brought out, men in hardhats would appear, and the Wall that sliced across this open grassy field would be undone. Sections of it would be sent to museums around the world. For the first time since 1945, Germany would be united.

Just a few years earlier, it seemed impossible that the Wall would become a curiosity for tourists instead of a deadly barrier. And as I stood before it—touching its cool skin and taking photos of artistic graffiti—I thought about that night on November 9, 1989, when people stood on top of it waving the West German flag. The air was electrified with the future. Even I could feel it from my dorm in America.

And now I was standing before one of the icons of the Cold War.

People milled about, laughing, drinking beer, smoking weed. Chisels clanged against the Wall as tourists chipped off souvenirs. One man used a sledgehammer and pounded off chunks as big as my fist—he placed these into a rucksack. Mauerspechte, I thought. Wallpeckers. That's what the woman in the tourist office called them.

A wooden ladder leaned against a bright red section of Wall, and I watched people climb it. Once they were at the top, they straddled it with one leg in West Germany, and the other in the East. The ladder was then taken and someone else climbed up. In this way, the ladder juddered down the Wall. I got in line as dark clouds scudded overhead.

This is how I found myself on top of the Berlin Wall. The concrete was cold against my jeans and, as I sat there looking

down the length of the murderous strip, I thought about World War II and the ruins of the Third Reich. This city had unleashed so much pain onto Europe, and here I was in the heart of the nightmare. I had the good sense to realize how rare it was to experience this moment, and I sat there until my legs went numb. Traffic grumbled in the distance. The ladder was long gone and I was marooned. How to get down? Others dangled by their fingertips and then dropped to the grass. I wiped my hands on my black trenchcoat and lowered myself down over a spray-painted doodle. I hung for a moment, my face pressed against gritty concrete, and I closed my eyes. Let go, I thought.

I don't remember falling but I do remember lying on my back and looking up at the Wall. The ground was damp and, as I lay there, I considered the men and women who had died trying to scale it. The last thing they would have seen was the Wall, rising up, like a headstone.

I slapped bits of grass and dirt away from my coat and considered what I'd see next. I unfolded a map and studied the topography of a city that was full of scars. I'd studied the Third Reich for a long time and now I was here, in the capital of hate.

A man in a leather jacket approached and held out a hammer and chisel. At first, I thought he was loaning them to me.

"Nein," he smiled, rubbing his fingers together. "Zehn mark."

Ah, I nodded. For ten Deutschmarks I could rent the tools and become a Mauerspechte. I dug into my wallet and thought about bringing chunks of history home with me.

"Your five minutes," the goateed man said holding up a stopwatch, "it start now."

I took the tools, and began to chip away at the past.

Brandenburg Gate and Bebelplatz

I've returned to Berlin many times since that first visit. What can I say? I love the place. Berlin went from one of the most repressive, intolerant, and brutal cities on the planet to become one of the most accepting, green, and progressive. To

walk around Germany's largest city is to realize that the past is layered and inescapable. On one street is a damaged cathedral that acts as a war memorial—Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche—and down another street is a section of the Berlin Wall. Turn a corner, and you're confronted with hip restaurants serving kale patties and grilled pork knuckle. Another corner, and you're in Alexanderplatz, which hasn't changed much since it was rebuilt in the style of Soviet modernism in the 1960s. To be in Berlin is to walk through a museum of urban history. The past is always present and it's impossible to avoid thinking of the grinding collisions between fascism, communism, and capitalism.

The streets pulse with neon lights, trams, and it seems that you can find currywurst—a grilled brat smothered in spicy tomato sauce with fries on the side—just about everywhere. Rather than traditional bars, Berliners visit their local convenience store, buy a few bottles of beer, fomp them open, and sit at picnic tables outside. Smoking? Yes, of course. And as night falls, it's popular to stroll with your drink and talk with friends. I love the schizophrenic nature of this sprawling, energetic, damaged, Frankenstein's monster of a city.

Since I write about the Holocaust, my research brings me to those places that still bear the scars of the Third Reich. While most tourists will look at the iconic stone columns of Brandenburg Gate and think of President Kennedy's "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech—or perhaps Ronald Reagan's "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall" speech—whenever I stand before this symbol of the city I can't help but think of that night on January 30, 1933 when Hitler became chancellor of Germany. His power was now total and he was treated to a torchlight parade where thousands of brown-shirted Sturmabteilung (SA) troops thundered through Brandenburg Gate. A new future had been forged. They marched beneath the Goddess of Victory, assured that the old ways would be smashed under the ferocious hammer of National Socialism. A river of torches flowed through the dark as they sang-shouted the "Horst Wessel Lied," the Nazi anthem.

*Raise the flag! The ranks tightly closed!
The SA marches with calm, steady step.
Comrades shot by the Red Front and reactionaries
march in spirit within our ranks.*

*Clear the streets for the brown battalions,
clear the streets for the storm division!
Millions are looking upon the swastika full of hope,
the day of freedom and of bread dawns!*

A mere fourteen weeks later, just up the street in Bebelplatz, the Nazis would gut a university library. On the night of May 10, they broke down the door and hauled out 20,000 books from "degenerate authors" like Bertolt Brecht, Erich Maria Remarque, James Joyce, Tolstoy, and anyone who happened to be Jewish. Fire was used again. But this time it wasn't for ceremony; it was used to destroy ideas. There was a mood of celebration as the bonfire was fed armloads of books. Flames shot high into the night sky.

One of the books that was burned that night was *Almansor* by Heinrich Heine, a German Jew. A single sentence of his would be disturbingly prophetic in the years to come: "When they burn books, men are next."

Bebelplatz is fairly quiet today. There is a memorial plaque in the center of the square and, across the street, is a thriving market of booksellers. They stand around cardboard boxes and arrange their goods with care. They chitchat and drink coffee. The last time I was there, I bought a collection of poetry by Heine.

Down the Stairs at Mohrenstrasse

When Hitler saw the Old Reich Chancellery, which had housed German heads of state since 1875, he reportedly waved a dismissive hand and said, "It's fit for a soap company." He ordered it ripped down and demanded that a New Reich Chancellery, the Reichskanzlei, be built in its place. It would be Hitler's official residence, no cost would be spared, and it would be massive, modern, and intimidating. Hitler wanted visitors to feel small. He wanted the architecture of the Reichskanzlei to swallow them up.

And so, in January 1938, Hitler turned to his favored architect, Albert Speer. Within a matter of days, some 4,000 workers were blasting and hauling and digging. They worked around the clock, and they wouldn't stop until Hitler's home was finished one year later.

At least, that's the official story. In reality, planning began at least two years earlier and everything—furniture, chandeliers, light sockets—wasn't completed until the early 1940s. There was no denying, however, that the Reichskanzlei was huge. It sprawled over several blocks and it was a perfect model of fascist architecture with its large doors, tightly-spaced windows, and stark stone edifices. It was meant to last a thousand years.

On the outside, the Reichskanzlei was warship gray and, on the inside, it was fitted with huge slabs of red granite. The Marble Gallery that visitors had to walk along in order to reach

Hitler's office was twice the length of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, and it was paved with lustrous red flagstones. Nazi banners, statues, and oil paintings lined the walls. It was the first non-smoking building in Europe.

Hitler was so deeply impressed with Albert Speer's blueprints and oversight of the Reichskanzlei that he commissioned the young architect to redesign all of Berlin. Although it isn't discussed much nowadays—because after all we're dealing with the delusions of a madman—Hitler dreamed of plowing most of Berlin into the ground and rebuilding it, brick

by brick, after Germany won the war. Berlin would cease to exist. In its place would be a mighty new Greco-Roman fever dream called "Germania." It would be the capital of the world. And Speer would

design it all: the Avenue of Splendors, the Great Plaza, and the Triumphal Arch, which would be three times larger than the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. There would also be the Große Halle, modelled after the Pantheon, and it would be a colossal sixteen times larger than the dome of St Peter's. The Great Hall would hold 180,000 citizens. Speer was so exacting in his design of this bloated stone tumor that he worried about the effect that exhaled breath might have upon the ceiling. Would it rain inside? Maybe.

These grand plans would be set into motion once the Third Reich finished up the pesky task of conquering Russia. All would be well by Christmas 1941 when Germany had total control of Europe. What could go wrong?

The war, of course, didn't go as planned and the Führer was needed on the Eastern front. He spent little time in his new home of the Reichskanzlei.

When the Soviet Union began to shell Berlin without mercy, this palace—which had been built to last a thousand years—only existed for a few dozen months. By May 1945, the outside was badly pocked with shrapnel, the stonework was riddled with bullet holes, and most of the windows were smashed. When Soviet troops ran into it, throwing hand grenades and ripping down swastikas, they searched for Hitler. He had to be nearby. After all, this was his home. Where was he?

When the smoke cleared, Berlin was carved up into sectors and the Soviets had the Reichskanzlei ripped down. Nothing was saved.

They wanted to make sure that no scrap of Nazism could be used as a gathering place for those Germans who remained true believers.

The red granite of the interior was hauled to Treptower Park and was used to build the Soviet War Memorial. If you'd like to see the remains of the Reichskanzlei you simply need to enter a huge cemetery. Here, surrounded by 7,000 dead troops of the Red Army, is what used to be one of the crown jewels of Nazism. A hammer and sickle have been pounded into the re-purposed stone.

There isn't much to see today where the Reichskanzlei once stood. Apartment blocks were built in its immense footprint and shops run along the ground floor. A modest sign commemorates the history that once existed here and, just behind it, is an excellent Chinese restaurant called Peking Ente Berlin.

Not too far away is the U-Bahn station of Mohrenstrasse. If you go down the stairs and wait on Platform 1 you'll notice that the walls are red stone. So is the floor. It's the only subway station in Berlin that has this quirk. Ever since the station was rebuilt in 1950, there have been persistent rumors that slabs of the Reichskanzlei were bolted onto the walls. And why not? The rubble was only a few hundred feet away. Why not use it? Trains still need to run. People still need to be taken from Point A to Point B.

Platform 17

The railway made the Holocaust possible. Never before had a targeted group of people been carried so efficiently, so swiftly, to their deaths. Victims were plucked from their homes and moved to camps in a matter of days all because of a web of iron rails that was controlled by Deutsche Reichsbahn—the German Reich Railway. A surprisingly moving memorial to this aspect of the Holocaust can be found at Grunewald Station. It's called Gleis 17.

The first Jews of Berlin were deported from here on October 18, 1941. Cruelly, and perhaps intentionally, it was the Sabbath. Some one thousand souls were pushed into cattle cars, latches were locked into place, and a steam engine stamped with a red DB symbol on its snout pulled away. They were being sent to the ghettos at Łódź and Warsaw. Soon trains were leaving directly for the concentration camps of Theresienstadt and Auschwitz. By the end of the war, over 50,000 human beings had stepped onto Platform 17 and ripped away from all they ever knew. It's hard to imagine any of them saw Berlin again.

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On the fiftieth anniversary of that first transport a plaque was placed onto Gleis 17. The site was later upgraded with 186 heavy steel sheets drilled into the edge of the platform. Arranged in chronological order, they list the final destination for each train that departed from Platform 17.

It's easy to stand at Grunewald Station today and imagine trains huffing away for Poland or to the concentration camps of Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen, both of which are just north of Berlin. In fact, if you wanted to catch a train to either of these camps today you could do it from one of the newer platforms near the entrance. You'd be there in an hour.

To stand on this decommissioned platform is to hear trains rumbling on nearby tracks. Whistles pierce the air. There is the smell of creosote. Wild trees grow in the rocky bed of this disused railroad track, and it's clear that Deutsche Bahn has no intention of cutting them down. The trees stand sentry. They wind rustles their leaves.

No train will depart from Platform 17 ever again.

From the Air

What made the trains leave in the first place was a medieval belief that Jews were parasites upon nations, as well as a modern belief in the junk science of eugenics. The Nazis thought a more beautiful society could be created through violence—it meant weeding out those who might corrupt pure Aryan blood. This was a racial fantasy, and it was forged in a blast furnace of hate.

That blast furnace was housed at Prinz-Albrecht-Straße. It was here that the SS Reich Main Security Office existed between 1933-1945. In a looming five-story building that had a mansard roof, Hitler's orders were carried out and terror was unleashed. This was the home not only of the SS, who ran the concentration camps, but it was also the headquarters for the Sicherheitspolizei (security police), the Sicherheitsdienst (intelligence agency of the SS), the Einsatzgruppen (roving murder squads), and the Gestapo (secret state police). They were all gathered in one building that sprawled over a city block. It was from here that phones sent messages to far away concentration camps. Plans of annihilation were drawn up. Men in jackboots and briefcases walked the tiled floors. Swastikas and busts of Hitler lined the walls. This was the dark heart of Nazism. And for those who were taken to the basement and thrown into a prison cell, they likely never walked in freedom again. Torture was used. If

you survived interrogation, you were either shot or sent to a camp.

Not surprisingly, this demonic place was torn down after the war and all that remains is a field of rubble. In the center of this wreckage is a museum called Topographie des Terrors. Inside, there is an exhibition space that details state crime, and tourists mill about pointing at photos and shaking their heads. There is also a library and an educational center. It remains one of Berlin's top-rated attractions (if that's the right phrase) and it routinely helps millions of visitors understand the roots of National Socialism and the death it birthed.

Outside, on a fringe of rubble, the basement cells that were once used for torture are open to the elements. It's possible to walk into these cramped spaces and imagine what it might have been like to be locked up, your hands chained to a brick wall, knowing that at any moment the door might swing open and a man with tools could enter. Standing in the ruins of the SS Reich Main Security Office is to feel both relief that the past is over and also worry that fascism could resurface in the future. That's the problem with history—it can be used as a blueprint.

With so many tourists taking photos, and with so many high school students walking through the museum, what was built here might hopefully never be rebuilt. Hope, as they say, floats, which is perhaps one reason why a popular newspaper called Die Welt has a hot air balloon ride across the street. It's tethered to the ground by a steel cable, and it's raised and lowered by a ten-ton winch. For a modest fee, you can climb into an enclosed metal basket with thirty other people and you'll be lifted 150 meters skyward. The view is spectacular. You can see Checkpoint Charlie, the needle of the Fernsehturm, Charlottenburg Palace, the river Spree, Berlin Cathedral, and much else. Although I'm a total jellyfish when it comes to heights, I stepped into the ringed basket and felt my stomach lurch as the massive helium balloon lifted up, up, up. The "Welt-Ballon," as Berliners know it, can be seen from just about anywhere in the city. I'd been meaning to ride it for years but I always managed to convince myself that I had better things to do than faff around in the sky. Finally, at last, I set my shoulders back, slapped down some Euros at the entrance gate, and was locked into the metal basket.

As we shuddered up into the gunpowder sky, I gripped the cage and told myself that the physics of buoyant gases really *could* cheat gravity. I didn't look straight down. Instead, I stared at the dark rubble of the SS Reich Main Security Office. Pigeons drifted at eye level

as the Welt-Ballon jolted to its highest point. A clutch of Japanese tourists took photos and made peace signs. I tried not to hyperventilate.

This area of Berlin was heavily shelled at the end of the war. In fact, most of the buildings were little more than smashed tombstones. Fires raged. Men and women were hanged from lampposts as traitors. Artillery shrieked through the air and heavy smoke fogged the streets. It's no surprise that the SS Reich Main Security Office and the Reichskanzlei were badly damaged, but it's a wonder that the Reichsluftfahrtministerium (Reich Aviation Ministry) escaped the war intact. This was the headquarters of the Luftwaffe and it was from here that Hermann Göring—that obese playboy who was in charge of Germany's air force—made sure the skies were controlled by the most advanced aircraft the world had ever seen.

It gave the illusion that he was everywhere. He descended from the air, godlike.

At least, that's how it started off in the 1930s. He once boasted that if enemy planes ever flew over Berlin he'd call himself Meyer, an anti-Semitic slur. As waves of British and American bombers pulverized the Reich on

a daily basis, this once dashing ace of the Great War (he was the last commander of the Red Baron's feared "Flying Circus"), retreated into crates of wine.

As I walked the air of Berlin, I stared down at the former headquarters of the Luftwaffe. This building, where plans for the Blitz on London had been approved, had somehow escaped bomb damage. While the rest of Berlin boiled in fire, this massive complex of 56,000 square meters somehow, miraculously, survived. Today, it's one of the few examples of Nazi architecture still in existence. It's currently used by the Bundesministerium der Finanzen, which is Germany's version of the internal revenue service. The IRS.

From the air, my eyes tracked between the rubble of the former SS Headquarters to the hulking clean lines of the former headquarters of the Luftwaffe. Land and air. One is destroyed; the other is in perfect condition. And between these two former sites of the Third Reich is a preserved section of the Berlin Wall. The past divides the past.

After fifteen minutes of floating, our balloon is cranked back down to the earth. A tourist from Russia is already pulling out a cigarette and tucking it behind his ear so that he can light it when we're on the ground. I've been

clenching my fists without realizing it and my tongue is dry. I take a few deep breaths and look at Tempelhof airport to the south. It closed several years ago and has been turned into a massive park—runways are now bike paths. Built in 1926, this is where Hitler climbed into a Junker tri-motor airplane and rose into the skies. He was the first politician to use air travel so extensively, and this meant he could give a speech in Munich in the morning, have lunch in Hamburg, and then stand before tens of thousands in Berlin by dinnertime. To his followers, it gave the illusion that he was everywhere.

He descended from the air, godlike.

From the Ground

When I first visited Berlin, I wanted to see where Hitler spent the last few months of his life underground. The Führerbunker was a warren of reinforced concrete rooms that had been dug into the back garden of the Reichskanzlei. Although it has since flooded, and there really isn't anything to see, I still wanted to stand on the spot where the war unofficially came to an end. Back then it wasn't listed on any map and, to be honest, I was too embarrassed to ask the locals where it might be. And so, I left Berlin without seeing it. I simply had no idea where to look. Where was it?

In the years since the Wall has come down, many tourists have asked this question and Berlin has struggled with an answer. To commemorate the site is clearly wrong, but to avoid having any signs at all invites misinformation and it allows rogue tour guides to offer fanciful stories about how Hitler might have escaped to South America in a submarine. (He didn't.)

Here's what happened.

Adolf Hitler entered the Führerbunker on January 16, 1945 and from that moment on it became the center of Nazi power. As the air raids increased, the bunker was expanded. More concrete was poured onto the roof and steel doors were fitted into place. Paintings and luxury furniture were taken from the New Reich Chancellery in a failed attempt to make the cramped space feel homey. It was constantly damp and the ventilation system ran nonstop. It's easy to imagine empty bottles of booze on desks and ashtrays full of crushed cigarettes. The electricity flickered on and off. A switchboard connected Hitler to his generals.

As the Red Army advanced, and as their artillery began to crash all around the city, buildings dissolved into the streets. As for

Hitler, he was a man in decline. His quack doctor, Theodor Morrell, had him on a dazzling cocktail of drugs including oxycodone, testosterone, methamphetamine, cocaine, and much else. By the end of his life, Hitler—who refused to drink alcohol—was a drug addict. It’s possible that he also suffered from the early stages of Parkinson’s because his left hand shook violently. Put another way, his body and mind mirrored the state of the Third Reich itself. He still displayed bouts of nuclear grade anger, especially as the defensive lines around Berlin began to shrink, and he still had delusions that the Third Reich would somehow rise above the Russian onslaught and win the war. The Jews, of course, were responsible for it all.

Hour by hour, the Russians closed in on this final outpost of Nazism. A ferocious thunderstorm of artillery shrieked down and, from inside the Führerbunker’s protective shell, the ceiling rumbled. Hitler began to talk about suicide.

Shortly after lunch on April 30, 1945, he stepped into his study with his longtime girlfriend, Eva Braun. They had recently married. He wore his Nazi uniform and black trousers. They sat on a small sofa and probably exchanged words. No one can know.

What we do know is that Eva Braun—now Eva Hitler—placed a cyanide pill between her teeth, and bit down. At the time, it was believed that cyanide caused a swift and painless death, but it is now understood that dying by cyanide poisoning would be prolonged and agonizing. While it’s true that cyanide spreads quickly throughout the body—it destroys mitochondrial electron transport at the cellular level and renders the body incapable of making energy from oxygen—it’s also true that the heart and diaphragm shut down in a matter of seconds. You would probably retain consciousness for up to five minutes. Rather than experiencing a quick death, it would feel like an eternity. The body is paralyzed but the mind continues to function. Notably, Zyklon B, which was the chemical agent used in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, was hydrogen cyanide. This is how hundreds of thousands of people died in the Holocaust. And according to those who found Eva Braun’s body, her face was contorted and horror-stricken.

As for Hitler, the architect of so much destruction, he cocked a pistol against his right temple. A framed photo of his mother was on a small table, and it’s possible that he glanced over at it. His left hand would be shaking. His wife was dead or dying next to him. And then, at 3:15, he pulled the trigger.

Today, the ruins of the Führerbunker are beneath a parking lot. The site was unmarked until 2006, which explains why it was hard for me to find when I first visited Berlin. Moreover, the Wall was built close to the remains of the bunker, and this meant the site was off limits—it was in a forbidden zone guarded by East German soldiers. No one could reach it. After Berlin was reunified, it was decided that an apartment building would be constructed near the site where Hitler shot himself. This was intentional. City planners wanted to discourage tourists from lingering at this site, so it was made residential, boring, unremarkable. In fact, if you didn’t know where to look, you’d walk right by the Führerbunker. There’s a kindergarten nearby. Kids play in a sandbox. And down the street is the chic and sprawling Mall of Berlin.

I’ve stood in the parking lot and imagined the bunker beneath my feet. It’s almost totally ruined and water has flooded the tunnels. The last time I was there, I held a plan of the Führerbunker and tried to chart where Hitler had shot himself. From what I could tell, it occurred beneath where a green dumpster stands today.

As I moved over the asphalt, I made my way to the children’s sandbox. Hitler was afraid of his corpse being taken to Moscow and placed on display, so his final orders were also his final wishes. Both he and Eva were burned in a shell hole. His followers offered up a final Hitlergruß—a Nazi salute—and then they either fled the bunker or shot themselves. The sandbox near the parking lot is roughly where Hitler’s body was burned.

Standing there, you can almost see the giant glass dome of the Reichstag. This is the seat of the federal government and the huge dome on top was opened in 1999. Aside from offering a spectacular view of modern Berlin, it’s possible to look down into the debating chamber of the parliament. In a very real way, the politicians of today are watched from above. It is a constant reminder that the people of Germany oversee their elected officials.

Just up the road from the Führerbunker is one of the largest memorials to the Holocaust in the world. Its official name is Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. It is one of the most visited sites in Berlin. Opened on the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II, it covers 200,000 square feet and, rising up from the edges, are 2,711 concrete slabs called “stelae.” Each one is eight feet wide and they are arranged in a grid. The tallest ones—towering

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up fifteen feet—are in the middle. The memorial is built on a former “death strip” of the Berlin Wall and it’s in the absolute heart of the city. Brandenburg Gate is nearby, the massive park of Tiergarten is across the street, and Potsdamer Platz is down the road.

To enter the Holocaust Memorial is to feel like you’re sinking. The stelae grow in height as you move towards the center. It’s isolating and disorientating. The sun gets blocked out and it feels like you’re moving through a massive graveyard. To walk through the stelae is to see images of other people—almost like ghosts—gliding within your line of sight and then vanishing. The concrete is smooth and you can hear snatches of conversation, echoing. The grumbling traffic is silenced and it feels as if you’re separated from life, almost lost. What I find most interesting is how others appear and disappear right before you. They seem to live for a moment, then die.

Leaving the Holocaust Memorial means the stelae begin to shrink, and you rise up into the world, into an energized new Berlin. Today, Germany’s capital is open-minded, progressive, and tolerant. To walk around modern Berlin is to be in a city that has been reborn. The ruins of the Third Reich are still there if you know where to look, and they have been carefully documented for future generations. To visit these places is to hope that fascism might never again march into the halls of power. After all, if it happened here, what’s to prevent it from happening again? ●