

BY LUTZ LICHTENBERGER

In March 1952, the German writer Kurt Kusenberg published what today would be called a “think piece” in a newspaper – its headline: “Nothing is to be taken for granted. In praise of hardship.” With more than a touch of nostalgia, the author reflected on the oddly halcyon days after the war had ended seven years hence. Nothing was working – no mail, no trains, no traffic; people were homeless and hungry; dead bodies were still being found under the rubble. But Kusenberg fondly remembers the time. “Like children,” people had begun to re-establish close ties, to reweave the social fabric that had come undone. He recommended his readers put themselves back into the state of mind of the time that had been “starved, tattered, wretched and dangerous.” In the absence of order of any kind, people had to redefine what morals and social cohesion meant: “Decency did not rule out ingenuity and subterfuge – or even the petty theft of something to eat. But in this life of part-time crime, there was honor among thieves, and it probably rested on higher moral underpinnings than today’s iron-cast conscience.”

The journalist Harald Jähner tells Kusenberg’s story in his magisterial new book *Wolfszeit. Deutschland und die Deutschen – 1945–1955* (The time of the wolves. Germany and the Germans – 1945–1955), published this year by Rowohlt Berlin that has become the surprise hit of the season, even surpassing Michelle Obama’s *Becoming* on the non-fiction bestseller list. While not exactly a beach read, Jähner’s gripping 500-page X-ray-vision tale of an often overlooked and misperceived phase of German history reveals, like all great history books, as much about the first decade after the war as about today.

Jähner combines the scholarly inquisitiveness and big-picture view of the historian with the seasoned journalist’s keen eye for the rich anecdote and colorful detail. For many years, Jähner worked as the editor of the feature pages of the daily *Berliner Zeitung*, where he wrote clever and whimsical essays of the highest order on everything from Angela Merkel’s



Project (clearing the) runway: Trümmerfrauen at work

## Nobody time

Harald Jähner’s story of the first 10 years after the demise of the Nazis has mesmerized German readers

workaround style of governing to his longings for the time when people still addressed him with a “Dear” in e-mails instead of the now common “Hello,” which is so devoid of any light-footed charm.

In *Wolfszeit*, Jähner set out to tell the story behind the “force of history’s huge events,” the changes in Germans’ daily lives, like suddenly having to live hand to mouth, to loot and barter on the black market. Some embraced the temptations of a society bereft of its former sexual mores, while others waited futilely for husbands or lovers to return from Soviet prisons.

At the outset of Jähner’s story, Germany is in ruins, both physically and spiritually. More than half of the population is in a place where they do not belong or do not want to be. Nine million Germans have lost their homes or been evacuated; there are 14 million refugees and displaced persons, 10 million newly released forced laborers and several million prison-

ers of war returning to an uncertain existence.

Jähner is well aware of the multilayered narratives and political provocation implicit in retelling the struggles of the time. These issues strike at the heart of the country’s psyche today as much as they did 75 years ago. Usually, he writes, the past becomes rosier over time, but in the case of the postwar era, the opposite is true. It has become darker in retrospect, partly due to “the widespread need of Germans to view themselves as victims.” The indeed lethal winters of 1946 and 1947 had to be recounted in ever-gloomier language for people to assuage their feelings of guilt for the atrocities of the Nazis, of which so many regular Germans were at least somewhat aware of or involved in.

Whenever Jähner writes of the undisputed suffering and hardships Germans were forced to endure, he calmly contrasts their plight with the abominable fate of Jews and other victims of persecution by

the depraved “master race.” Yet he also notes that the survival instinct tends to override the guilty conscience. This collective phenomenon on display after 1945 is so disturbing as to call into question one’s faith in mankind; yet these doubts are somewhat dispelled by the fact that from this literal and figurative rubble would emerge a society that has become an anti-fascist bulwark among Western democracies.

In the immediate aftermath of the Nazis’ lock on power, order on the streets broke down. Policemen looked at each other in disbelief, wondering whether any of their authority remained. They often just took off their uniforms, burned them or dyed them a different color. Many high-ranking officials committed suicide, jumping out of buildings, poisoning themselves or slashing their wrists. “The ‘nobody time’ had begun,” Jähner writes. “Laws were suspended, nobody was responsible for anything. Nobody owned anything if

they weren’t literally sitting on it. Nobody provided safety. The old power had run away, and the new one hadn’t yet arrived.”

And yet there was already a new can-do spirit taking shape. Jähner takes his readers into the mind of Ruth Andreas-Friedrich, a journalist of sterling anti-Nazi credentials. During the summer of 1945, a mere two months after Hitler’s death, she sat in a demolished but bustling Berlin and recorded in a diary her urge to at last get a grip on life:

The entire city is in a rush of anticipation. Everyone wants to work themselves to the bone, to possess a thousand hands and a thousand brains. The Americans are here, the Brits, the Russians. This is what is important; that we are at the center of activity; that the world powers meet among our ruins; and that we prove to their representatives just how serious we are with

our fervor, how infinitely serious we are with our efforts at redemption and ascent. Berlin is running on all cylinders. If they can now understand us and forgive us, they will get everything from us. Everything! That we renounce National Socialism, that we consider the new to be better, that we work and are principally of good will. We have never been so ripe for redemption.

Jähner evokes picture after picture of a society corrupted, demoralized and freed – all at the same time. The tale of the *Trümmerfrauen* (rubble women) illustrates a more nuanced story than the iconic images of women clearing away rubble in their fancy dresses – the only ones they had left. These women were often forced to work in the clearance of debris – a monumental task that took years to complete. It was part of their denazification requirements or disciplinary provisions for “HwG” women, shorthand for those who had had “frequently alternating sexual partners.” Yet the images of women handing off buckets to one another became a “visual metaphor” for community spirit amid a society rent at the seams. “Reconstruction was presented with a heroic, almost erotic face, something gratefully easy to identify with and to feel proud of, despite defeat,” Jähner notes.

Through all the storylines of the detailed and sweeping book runs a delicate argument not to be mistaken for moral indifference. The author carefully delineates how for some time after 1945, Germany needed to block out the unspeakable crimes it had committed against humanity. Jähner is conflicted about the outcome, as he realizes there would have been no such smooth transformation to stable democracy and open society without the partial amnesia and uncanny zeal that defined the first decade after the war. In a pointed encapsulation, Jähner neatly sums up the unconscious public awareness of the time: “No optimism without bitterness, no grievance without gratitude.” There is but one glaring lesson to be drawn from his story – to fully embrace the persistent ambivalences of history.

### LUTZ LICHTENBERGER'S TRANS-ATLANTIC BOOK REVIEW

#### ALL TOGETHER NOW

In the late 1990s, Heinz Bude became a star German intellectual. The sociology professor wrote an essay published by a small publishing house on low-quality paper: “Generation Berlin” perfectly captured the *Zeitgeist*. Berlin was the nation’s new capital and Bude detected a spirit of transformation in its wake. There would be no more ill-fated notions of German destiny, as evidenced by the horrors of Nazi ideology, or of the student revolts of 1968 and their overwrought mission to transform humanity with half-digested Marxist theories. Instead, a new pragmatist generation would finally cast aside old grievances and outdated ideas and make Germany a modern and individualistic society.

Over the past 20 years, Bude has established himself as a shrewd diagnostician of the many social insecurities of the upper middle class. In his latest volume he muses over the idea of “solidarity, the future of a great idea” (*Solidarität. Die Zukunft einer großen Idee*). Just as when

Camus wrote the *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Bude says, we live “in an age of disillusioned ideologies and overrated science.” There was no way to trace the realities of our personal lives or the events of world history back to a set of laws or principles. Solidarity under these circumstances – i.e. not being able to impose the notion – was not a solution, but a question: “What is worth living for?” Solidarity might often fail to make a major difference on the whole and could come at a high price for the individual. But to be aware of the absurdity of being meant coming together, proving “that we can continue together and [the individual] doesn’t have to give up.”

HEINZ BUDE

*Solidarität. Die Zukunft einer großen Idee*, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich, 2019

#### NO MORE WELTANSCHAUNG

Hannah Arendt may well be the political philosopher of the hour. She was born in the north German city of Hanover to secular Jewish parents. In the 1920s, Arendt studied under Martin Heidegger, the young and ingenious superstar of philosophy who became her lover for a time before revealing himself to be a crude anti-Semite and flirting with the idea of becoming the philosophical mastermind of the Nazis. (They ultimately had no use for him; after 1945, Heidegger partly recanted his allegiance and became a recluse.) Arendt fled Germany in 1933, first to Paris and in 1941 to New York, becoming a US citizen in 1951. In 1961, she wrote a series of highly controversial articles for *The New Yorker* about the trial of the German war criminal who organized the transportation of Jews to the concentration and extermination camps. Arendt’s work on the “banality of evil,” later published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, made her a household name. She later became a professor at the New School for Social Research and wrote a series of books on political philosophy.

Maike Weißpflug, herself a political theorist in Berlin, has now written a thorough examination of Arendt’s “art of thinking politically.” Weißpflug canvasses the distinct style of Arendt’s “approach to reasoning,” eschewing classical abstract theories that falsely claim objectivity. Instead, the political should be understood as based on individual experiences. As Weißpflug claims in her intellectually engaging portrait, Arendt’s concept of placing truth over *Weltanschauung*, or worldview, “of not playing a role but trying to somehow be human,” has made her the North Star of our crazed times.

MAIKE WEISSPFLUG

*Hannah Arendt. Die Kunst, politisch zu denken*, Matthes & Seitz, Berlin, 2019

#### COUNTERREVOLUTIONS

Just like in the US, there’s a bull market abroad for books trying to explain the populist movements of the world, the success of the Trumps, Orbáns and Bolsonaro, the Front National in France, Lega Nord in Italy and the Alternative for Germany.

And now, along comes another contender by the German sociologist Cornelia Koppetsch: *Die Gesellschaft des Zorns. Rechtspopulismus im globalen Zeitalter* (The society of rage. Right-wing populism in the global age). While the surprise hit is written in sufficiently sociological jargon to pass as a scholarly work, it is also refreshingly clear-sighted and devoid of speechifying, patronizing undertones. It faces its subject on equal footing. The German weekly *Die Zeit* called it today’s most bracing book on the matter.

Koppetsch argues that the rise of right-wing parties correlates with a “counter-revolution” against globalism and transnationality. Their rise follows a “collective emotional reflex” against societal change. Koppetsch limns with concision the decline in power of the Western nation state over the past 30 years, from the fall of the Iron Curtain to the repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis, which is unresolved to this day. Governmental institutions no longer have the scope to efficiently assist those most affected by job-market upheaval.

However, Koppetsch argues, today’s divisions run deeper – in an “affective ontological” sense. They pit those feeling secure and in control of their lives in a liberal cosmopolitan world against others who sense a loss of influence over their “habits, views and perceptions – their identity.”

CORNELIA KOPPETSCH

*Die Gesellschaft des Zorns. Rechtspopulismus im globalen Zeitalter*, transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2019