



REFLECTIONS

Why We Were There

BY JANET ANDRES

For anyone familiar with Cold War-era East Berlin, the spare, bleak images of Germany's Oscar-winning film "The Lives of Others" will likely evoke viscerally the uncertainty, grimness and quiet despair of that place and time. This year's best foreign-language film depicts a gray, angst-ridden communist world in which the all-mighty Stasi (secret police) monitored and controlled virtually every aspect of life — a plight all the more appalling given the proximity of a tantalizing West Berlin just beyond the infamous, stranger-than-fiction wall.

I remember yet a third Berlin: a four-power, four-sector city of commandants, parades and diplomats with strange titles — a postwar occupation regime still in place in the 1980s. I worked in the political section of U.S. Mission Berlin, the diplomatic component of the U.S. military government.

Like our British, French and Soviet counterparts, we moved easily between East and West Berlin and spent as much time in the 1940s as in the 1980s. For the three Western Allies, our mission — to protect West Berlin and preserve the chance for reunification — was exciting and inspiring. Yet while life was good on our side of the

Janet Andres joined the Foreign Service in 1978, and was a political officer at the U.S. Mission in Berlin from 1982 to 1985. She also served in Khartoum, Vienna, Reykjavik and Washington, D.C. Her last posting was as consul general in Frankfurt. She retired in 1997.

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wall, a junket to the east was always diverting, with its noir undercurrent of menace and permeating scent of soft coal — as dreary as the West was bright.

Ostensibly, it was the 12,000 Allied soldiers who kept West Berlin from being swallowed up. But the deterrent was more complex, especially after a series of East-West agreements in the 1970s helped stabilize the European divide. The sides agreed not to unilaterally alter Berlin's status quo, but couldn't agree on what it was, leaving the city in its netherworld of occupation and ensuring it would stay politically tense and diplomatically challenging.

Over the years, with day-to-day governance in local hands, the occupation regime, with its committees, protocols and rituals, became a kind of parallel universe narrowly focused on status and access. The elaborate machinery was likened to a legal house of cards, but it proved remarkably durable, providing the nuts and bolts to cope with many disagreements.

In the end, though, West Berlin survived the Cold War because all parties realized that violent change would involve unacceptable risks and costs; quarrels had to be creatively managed. The Soviets, who maintained that East

Berlin belonged to East Germany, worked to keep West Berlin isolated, hoping its ties to the West would erode. The Western Allies refused to concede East Berlin, but focused on preserving the status quo for West Berlin and enhancing its ties to the West.

Given Berlin's disputed status and isolated location, the Allied agenda was of necessity limited. But pursued diligently, it was ultimately accomplished. Looking back, my feelings are mixed: pride for our tenacity in West Berlin; regret for being little more than a voyeur to the daily misery of life in that part of the city we wrote off; and guilt for enjoying my years there so much.

Today, the rich, glittering Berlin I knew is gone, along with the dreary, gray one. A united city is once again Germany's capital, and new construction has erased most traces of the wall. It is rebuilding its reputation as a mecca for artists and cultural innovators.

But, at the same time, Berlin has also become one of Germany's poorest cities, struggling to cope with a mountain of debt, crumbling infrastructure and high unemployment. With the end of the Cold War, the city lost its political singularity, along with the glamour and generous subsidies that went with it.

Some Berliners may wish to turn the clock back, but I doubt if many Allied veterans of occupied Berlin would choose to do so. A little nostalgia is understandable, but it's time to embrace reunited Berlin and wish it the best. After all, that's why we were there. ■

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