

Per Ahlmark

Studying Freedom on German Soil



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I have to admit that I have always been reluctant to go to Germany. In the 1960s, I covered a German election campaign for the then largest Scandinavian daily paper. But I felt uneasy during this assignment, and also later when visiting cities in the Bundesrepublik.

When I met German men, unknown to me, around or above fifty years of age, I often asked myself: What did he do during the war? Was he a member of the Nazi party? Did he belong to the victims or to the murderers?

When arriving in Israel for the first time, after the Six Day War, I met many survivors of the Holocaust and their children. They often had a much more uncompromising attitude, which was totally understandable in their cases. I will *never* set foot in Germany again, many of them said. "To me", some of them stated, "Germany is a killing field."

I come from a nation which has not been part of the European catastrophes of this century. The large majority of politicians and journalists in Sweden do not even understand them; their innocence is not seldom bordering on cynicism. But my own obsession with the Holocaust started

before I was 15 years old, when reading all the books on Nazism I could find in the local library.

Why I did so is hard to explain. I never met a Jew in Sweden until I went into politics some years later. When I visited Israel I fell in love with the country. Since then I have visited the Jewish state some 60–70 times. Later, when ugly antisemitism returned to my country (often disguised as anti-Zionism), I founded the Swedish Committee Against Antisemitism.

Thus, issues related to the Third Reich, the Final Solution and hatred against Jews were always crucial to my political philosophy, not least when I was member of Parliament and Government. And someone who has had Auschwitz as a center of his ideological universe, his thinking always comes back to Germany, “what sort of country is this?”

At the same time, in speeches and debates, I often praised West Germany. This is the only nation in Europe which has successfully tried to come to terms with its past. It is not hiding terrible truths from a new generation – Germany is not like Austria, Poland or the Baltic states.

On the contrary, I early got the feeling that most politicians of the Bundesrepublik lived up to the responsibility to resist anti-democratic groups in their own nation and totalitarianism in other parts of Europe. Germany’s solidarity with Nato and the Western democracies made a deep impact on me; so did German contributions to the European unification process. The importance of the “Bonner Republik” for the breakdown of Communism in Europe is enormous. Among the big nations on the European continent, I often said publicly, West Germany is the most stable democracy.

I lived with these dual feelings towards Germany for more than three decades and usually tried to avoid the country, which I was obviously fascinated by. Certainly, I understood that this attitude was untenable. I confessed the prejudice but did little to neutralize it.

So when Wolf Lepenies asked me – in Hiroshima of all places – if I would like to study and do research at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, it was a relief. Finally, I had a great reason to stay for two-thirds of a year in Berlin. I did not have to live any more with these feelings of ambiguity; at least I would be able to test, discuss and experience them on German soil with German friends and colleagues. Yes, I loved the idea: please, destroy my prejudice!

And I have been overwhelmed by these eight months in Grunewald, one of the happiest periods of my life. The freedom to read and write whatever I felt interesting. The unlimited kindness from almost everyone I have met. The openness when discussing both the nation’s past and the moral-political duties of contemporary Germany because of this past. The

vitality of the debate, the stability of German freedom and its democratic institutions.

Without being uncritical of certain tendencies in the German society or feeling totally confident about future politics of this country – about which country in the world could you be “totally confident”? – I am today much more relaxed, knowledgeable and “normalized” in my attitude towards Germany. Of course, the political strength of former Communists in the Eastern part of Germany and the emergence of so many young extremists on the Right in the same regions are alarming.

And the attempts to undermine German consciousness about its past are disgraceful. How could, for example, German mass media regard a charlatan like Martin Walser as a serious debater?

Still, during these months in Berlin I have been cured of most of my previous uneasiness about Germany. In *The German Predicament* (1997), the partly brilliant book by my friend and co-Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg, Andrei S. Markovits, there is a chapter called “Optimists and Pessimists”. It deals with future German policies and how nervous or confident we should be about them. Andrei’s analysis is relevant and profoundly important. I am not always sure how to react to his challenges. But nowadays, after my stay in Berlin, I am ready to discuss them without being distorted by previous anxiety.

Encouraging during the stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg was also to see how quickly Germany transformed its foreign policy from “never again war” to “never again genocide”. 19 democracies, including the “Berliner Republik”, unitedly carried out an airwar campaign to stop mass murder and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. We can argue about strategy and tactics, about lack of planning and about the attitude toward a possible ground war when Nato liberated Kosovo from the Milošević regime.

But we cannot deny that for the first time ever a large number of free nations launched a major military operation for the most noble purpose: to stop a bunch of mass murderers. To me, Germany’s political maturity was confirmed when it took active part in this Nato rescue mission. *In the face of genocide, you shall not be a bystander.*

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Thus, it was inevitable that my research, reading and writing at the Wissenschaftskolleg would focus on democracy/dictatorship. That was also a continuation of several of my books published in Sweden. For some months I concentrated primarily on new studies, published in the US, on war, mass murder and famine especially during the 20th century. How are they related to freedom and tyranny?

I think I reached concrete and almost definite conclusions. Those who now read these words will probably regard them as pretentious or even ridiculous. My response is very simple: please, consider the arguments and findings summarized in my lecture at the Wissenschaftskolleg on June 1, 1999, which is printed in this *Jahrbuch*.

The very fact that those conclusions are not common knowledge in Western democracies, not even in the academic world or among “experts”, is more than surprising. The research has been made public in books by often well-known scholars. Yet, they have been shamefully overlooked, also in Germany and Sweden. These findings about war, “democide” and famine have very rarely (probably never) been put together. When combining them most people find the result dramatic.

Adding to this project, during my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg I wrote a case study comparing the Swedish attitude to the denial of the Holocaust in 1989 and 1999, respectively. These two years give you images of two almost different nations. In 1989 there was a trial in Stockholm against Radio Islam, probably the most vicious anti-Jewish and neo-Nazi station in any European democracy since Hitler. The indifference of Swedish journalists and politicians at the time was disturbing, to say the least.

In 1999, however, the results of a great initiative by the Swedish Prime Minister, Göran Persson, were obvious. A unique educational project regarding the Holocaust, reaching almost all Swedish households and schools, has made a great impact on my country. It has also launched a broad international cooperation in the same field. I presented the paper about this surprising change of ideological climate in my country at an international conference on antisemitism after 1945, held at the Hebrew University (Jerusalem), June 13–16, 1999.

Finally, besides studying a number of books about German history after World War I, Isaiah Berlin’s liberalism and Yehuda Amichai’s poetry, I have also focused on the fellow travellers of the 20th century. A large number of “intellectuals” in many Western democracies have for decades praised or excused several Marxist regimes. In most cases they have not been members of any Communist party when giving credibility and prestige to Communist movements and dictatorships.

The literature about these people is growing fast nowadays. It has become evident even to the most forgiving in the West that the fellow travellers for a long time did seriously hurt the self-confidence of the democracies. Also, they weakened the ideological resistance against “socialist”, totalitarian governments.

Why have so many well-educated, famous and privileged personalities in the West embraced Stalin’s Soviet Union, Mao’s China, Castro’s Cuba and, sometimes, Pol Pot’s Cambodia?

What was the driving force for George Bernard Shaw, Lincoln Steffens, Lion Feuchtwanger, Le Corbusier, Romain Rolland, Theodore Dreiser, Arnold Zweig, Heinrich Mann, Louis Aragon, Anatole France, Ilya Ehrenburg, Maxim Gorkij, Ernst Toller, Bertold Brecht, Erwin Piscator, Julian Huxley, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Edmund Wilson, Upton Sinclair, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Harold Laski, Paul Robeson, Isadora Duncan, Felix Greene, Edgar Snow, Pablo Picasso, Noam Chomsky and many others?

Probably the most important book on fellow travellers is Paul Hollander's *Political Pilgrims* (first edition 1981; *Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba* 1928–1978). His general explanation is “that the more estranged a Western intellectual was from his society, the more likely he would end up admiring other social-political systems representing a counterpoint to his own”.

I admire Professor Hollander's work and attempts to explain why very intelligent and talented people have made fools of themselves by celebrating some of the worst tyrants in human history. During my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg I have tried to understand more about some of these “pilgrims”. A very preliminary conclusion after a lot of reading might be that it is difficult to summarize the fellow travellers in formulas or explanations that aspire to cover almost all of them. On the contrary, my impression is that these people and their motives are often very different. The psychology of the pilgrims differs a lot between individuals; so do their levels of knowledge, and their values regarding other issues.

It is interesting to see how fellow travellers commute between value fanaticism (supporting the most murderous regimes) and value relativism (“anything goes”). Equally revealing is that many Western intellectuals, who are the most critical citizens of their own democratic nations, turn totally uncritical when confronting the opposite societies, the tyrannies.

I am fascinated by fellow travellers because of the contrast between their political judgement (which was/is often disastrous) and their achievements in other areas (where they were/are often more than brilliant). I will probably continue writing about them as long as I live. The totalitarian temptation is one of the saddest human follies of our century. Epoch-making creativity in writing, painting and music continues to enrich our lives. When these two phenomena merge in a large number of renowned individuals, we could probably learn something from them.

At least we have to admit that greatness and disgusting foolishness sometimes walk hand in hand.