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978-0-521-11851-4 - Death in Berlin: From Weimar to Divided Germany

Monica Black

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

This book takes as its subject the rituals, practices, and perceptions surrounding death in one of the world's great metropolises – the city of Berlin – over a period of historical change as extraordinary and sustained as any in modern memory. Between the last years of the Weimar Republic and the construction of the Berlin Wall, over three turbulent decades, Berlin was fundamentally transformed time and again: from a latter-day Babel and the capital of a sick and dying republic, to the headquarters of the Nazi revolution, to the seat of Axis power in World War II. After Germany's defeat in that epic conflagration, the city was split in two: one half became the capital of the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR), the other an outpost of liberal democracy, territorially unmoored from the state – the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) – to which it belonged. From the panic of the Great Depression to the establishment of the Nazis' racial empire, to war, genocide, occupation, and national division, the changes this city endured and itself visited upon the world were staggering in their scope and frequency.

Yet the subject of this book – death – is something we instinctively think of as immutable. Throughout the time during which I have researched and written about death in Berlin, two anecdotes from my childhood have continually come to mind. I thought of them as guideposts, of a kind, for what interested me most about a subject not a few people tend to assume is depressing and even ghoulish. The anecdotes come from the two very different sides of my family. My mother's father's family were tobacco farmers in rural Randolph County, North Carolina. My maternal great-grandmother had fifteen children, about half of them daughters. It was customary on Friday evenings for the daughters, my great-aunts, along with my great-grandmother, to pile in the car and drive to the local funeral parlor for the viewing. It made no difference of any kind whether they

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[More information](#)

knew the person laid out at the funeral home or his or her family. They would return home and tell how well or poorly the person looked, how lifelike or not, and what a good (or, less often, bad) job the funeral director had done. In fact, it was easier for them to make such judgments when they were not acquainted with the dead person or his or her family.

The other side of my family were central Europeans and city dwellers. My father's parents were Hungarians and lived all of their lives in Budapest; that is, until the end of 1944. Having fled the Red Army during the battle for Budapest, they found themselves in 1945 in a Displaced Persons camp in the British occupation zone of Germany, near Cologne, where they lived for several years before emigrating to Argentina. Perhaps it was the stark and unforeseen and sudden vicissitudes of history that gave them a dark sense of humor. To give an example of what they found funny, one of my paternal grandparents' favorite arguments was about which of them would die first and by what method – suicide being among them. My great-grandmother and great-aunts from rural North Carolina would have found that kind of talk “morbid.” Yet they did not for one instant see going to the funeral parlor on Friday night to look at dead strangers that way. Viewings were nothing more than a genial and perfectly ordinary country pastime.

This lore from my childhood illustrates that, though the fact of death remains a constant of the human condition across space and time, our ways of thinking about it can be dramatically different across cultures. What may seem morbid, sacrilegious, unethical, or unnatural in one cultural context may simply be humorous in another. This extends to how we treat the physical bodies of the dead as well, which is almost necessarily bound up with moral concerns – that is, concerns about “right” and “wrong” ways of doing things. One of the fascinating aspects of the rituals of death – how the bodies of the dead are prepared for burial, how funerals are conducted, how corpses are disposed of, how we memorialize and talk about the dead, even what we wear to funerals, and whether or not we sing songs or talk or weep during them – is that, though there are no rule books that tell us how these matters are to be accomplished, we know when they are done “wrong” or in a way that makes us or others uncomfortable. This knowledge is by no means an innate or instinctive matter; it is a matter of culture at its most profound level. The practices of death are embedded within a complex web of values, attitudes, and sensibilities that are specific to a group of people in a particular time and allow individuals to know, almost unconsciously, what to do and *what not to do* where the dead are concerned.<sup>1</sup> It is for this

1 Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 204–6.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

3

reason that anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and other students of human life, communities, and behavior have so often turned to the rites and methods by which human beings take their leave of the dead to see what they can extract from them about the deeper layers of culture, those layers of which the practitioners of the rites and methods of death are themselves often quite unaware.

Within the thirty-odd years spanned by this book, Berlin stood at the center of some of the most dramatic events not only in German but also in European and world history. Circa 1930, when this narrative commences, the Weimar Republic was a democracy, but one deeply imperiled by rising political extremism and the ravages of the Great Depression, not least in its embattled capital, Berlin. Soon, a significant enough number of the German electorate, seeking an alternative to the seeming indecision and dysfunction of republican politics, would throw their support behind the authoritarian and populist message of Adolf Hitler, catapulting his National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP, or Nazi Party) to electoral success and himself to the chancellorship of Germany. Many Berliners would welcome both Hitler and the party to power with torchlight parades and patriotic songs. Nazism was less a concrete plan of political action than a set of doctrines aimed at a cultural revolution, a radical reshaping of German society into a *Volksgemeinschaft* – a people's, or racial, community. Over the coming years, the Nazis would project their fantasies of absolute power and racial utopia on Berlin in countless ways, revising the city in their image.

In 1939, the Nazis launched World War II, the single most destructive conflict in human history, by invading neighboring Poland. They directed that war from Berlin, and it was in the Third Reich's capital, too, that they outlined their plans to construct an empire based on race in Eastern Europe by enslaving and resettling whole populations and by carrying out genocide and ethnic cleansing. Even as this project went forward, victory eluded Germany's grasp; the front moved closer to Berlin, and the city became the site of intense aerial bombardment that left tens of thousands of civilians dead and laid waste to the built city – its apartment houses, factories, bridges, streets, parks, and cemeteries. In the end, Berlin was the final European battleground of that cataclysmic war. When the fighting stopped, the city's defeat and destruction were total. On May 8, 1945, in Karlshorst, a suburb outside Berlin, what was left of the German armed forces surrendered to the triumphant Soviets.

Now occupied by the armies of the wartime Allies, Berlin would be reinvented again in the years that followed World War II. Divided between a communist East and a liberal-democratic West, the city became ground zero in the Cold War and the staging ground for two rival ideas of how to

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

construct a good society.<sup>2</sup> Berlin was the site of the first major crisis of the Cold War – the Berlin blockade and airlift – which seemed to anticipate World War III. That did not come to pass, but shortly thereafter, Germany and Berlin were formally divided nonetheless. Over the next twelve years, East and West Berlin began gradually to develop unique and independent personalities and ways of life. But it was not until a summer morning in 1961 that the city's division became concrete. On August 13, Berliners East and West woke up to find their city indelibly – and, seemingly, permanently – severed, by a wall that would stand as physical evidence of a dictatorial East German communism.

These are the broad outlines, the backdrop of social, political, and ideological change, that provide the crucial setting and context in which this history of death in Berlin unfolds. Throughout the turmoil of the decades between 1930 and that summer morning in 1961 when the Berlin Wall went up, death was a constant, as it always is in human affairs. Across dramatically different styles of political rule and in radically dissimilar ideological circumstances; through the vagaries of total war, aerial bombardment, and its aftermath; through foreign occupation and the imposition of new forms of governance and social organization, Berliners – men and women, religious and nonreligious, rich and poor, notable and obscure – died, and they were buried, mourned, and remembered by their families and friends, peers, pastors, and colleagues. Over three decades of radical change, Berliners thought about their own deaths and the possibility of an afterlife, imagined heaven or final judgment or the attainment of nirvana. They attended the funerals of loved ones, grieved for and celebrated the dead, and tended their graves. Yet the many practices through which Berliners related to death in an abstract sense and cared for the dead in a literal sense, their ways of memorializing and those whom they chose to memorialize, and even their thoughts about the hereafter were never fixed. They shifted over time as political, social, ideological, material, and other circumstances changed.

This book aims to tell an alternative history of the great metropolis Berlin – a tale of a city indelibly shaped and continually remade by its inhabitants' changing encounters with and experiences and understandings of death. In each iteration of their city, Berliners were forced to confront the fact and evidence and consequences of mortality on slightly changed terms, terms they themselves constructed and reconstructed anew, though they were almost always unaware of doing so. If a city is, as Lewis Mumford said so memorably, a “conscious work of art,” then we cannot understand it and

2 Mary Fulbrook, *Interpretations of the Two Germanies, 1945–1990* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 2.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

its continual creation and re-creation apart from the minds of its millions of creators. At the same time, Mumford sagely observed, we must also be attuned to ways in which the mental is conditioned by existing “urban forms” as well as by changing times and needs, shifting material conditions, new forms of social organization, politics, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Through the rituals and customs of death and Berliners’ shifting relationship to their dead, the city’s inhabitants articulated an evolving sense of who they were as a community. Yet this relationship and these customs and rituals – even under the rule of revolutionary regimes like those of the Nazis and communists – were always based in tradition and rooted in older ways of doing things.

Death is of course a classic topic in the history of mentalities precisely because it can help reveal popular beliefs and show us the role of human imagination, collective structures of morality, and patterns of emotion in history. The great Carlo Ginzburg noted that the history of mentalities is often characterized by a focus “on the inert, obscure, unconscious elements in a given world view. Survivals, archaisms, the emotional, the irrational: all these are included in the specific field of the history of mentalities.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Ginzburg stressed that his exploration of the mind of the sixteenth-century miller Menocchio in *The Cheese and the Worms* would have been incomplete without examining its rationalist components. What this book shows is how unexamined aspects of culture – those that structure existence so quietly and unobtrusively that they are often entirely unnoticed by contemporaries, like the values attached to death – are nevertheless the subject of concerted mental activity, as contemporaries work through their meanings and change them. The study also aims to show how death – something utterly ubiquitous and that mostly appeared to contemporaries to be unchanging and even unchangeable – became the basis for collective reinvention over a variety of contexts.

This task is complicated by the fact that little has been written about death in twentieth-century Germany in its broadest sense outside the context of the world wars and the Holocaust. What has been written has tended to focus less on cultural patterns and private perceptions, long-standing practices and traditional sensibilities, and more on a few key issues – the national cult surrounding war death being a principal one.<sup>5</sup> When I set

3 Lewis Mumford, *The Lewis Mumford Reader*, Donald L. Miller, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 104.

4 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. by J. and A. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), xxiii.

5 Sabine Behrenbeck, *Der Kult um die toten Helden: Nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole 1923 bis 1945* (Vierow bei Greifswald: SH-Verlag, 1996); Jay Baird, *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990); George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping*

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[More information](#)

out to write this book I wanted to see how I might create a framework for bringing together the killing and dying associated with the world wars and the Holocaust and cultural perceptions of death that existed before, during, and after those events. That framework, as it has evolved, is narrative and chronological and attempts to be as scrupulously attentive to minute changes and historical specificity in one, circumscribed setting as the sources permit. I attempt to connect the reality and enormity and suddenness of mass, violent death in Germany (including deaths in which Germans were involved outside their national borders) with experiences of individual loss, long-term cultural patterns, and evolving mental structures related to death in its more prosaic, private, and “everyday” forms.<sup>6</sup> The aim, ultimately, is to understand the centrality of death to the evolving moral and social life of Berliners as an “imagined metropolitan community,”<sup>7</sup> in a city that stood at the center of some of the mid-twentieth century’s most transformative events. In doing so, I attempt to navigate and find the connections between the intimacies of the everyday and events on the grand historical stage that changed the lives of millions.

Perhaps the most immediate reference point for scholars of death in the European context is the work of the French historian Philippe Ariès. One of the central contentions of his great work, *The Hour of Our Death*, was that death, previously an intimate event experienced in the bosom of the family and community, and presided over authoritatively through the ancient rituals of the church, had become terrifying in modernity.<sup>8</sup> Ariès argued that, under the influence of secularization and medicalization, Europeans (and Americans) had come to shun death, to banish the dying to hospitals. As conservative and even quixotic as he was, and as much as he resented what he perceived as the destabilizing effects of modernity,<sup>9</sup> Ariès was nonetheless a man of his times, writing in a grand tradition arising out of the French Enlightenment that saw human development tending

*the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Klaus Latzel, *Vom Sterben im Krieg: Wandlungen in der Einstellung zum Soldatentod vom Siebenjährigen Krieg bis zum II. Weltkrieg* (Warendorf: Verlag Fahlbusch & Co., 1988).

6 Essays in a recent collection have explored related issues: Alon Confino, Paul Betts, and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York: Berghahn, 2008).

7 This is Benjamin Carter Hett’s riff on Benedict Anderson’s now-ubiquitous idea. Hett, *Death in the Tiergarten: Murder and Criminal Justice in the Kaiser’s Berlin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 11.

8 Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Vintage, 1982).

9 Patrick Hutton, *Philippe Ariès and the Politics of French Cultural History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 116–17. See also Hutton, “Philippe Ariès: Between Tradition and History,” in idem, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, NH: University of New England Press, 1993), 91–105.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

inevitably toward greater individualism and away from the communitarian values and relationships of the past. This narrative powerfully influenced his account of death in modernity, but so did his own experiences. “In my youth,” he wrote, “women in mourning were invisible under their crepe and voluminous black veils. Middle class children whose grandmothers had died were dressed in violet. After 1945, my mother wore mourning for a son killed in the war for the twenty-odd years that remained to her.” Yet such venerable customs as these had died away within Ariès’ own lifetime. After a death in French towns, he observed, “there is no way of knowing that something has happened: the old black and silver hearse has become an ordinary gray limousine, indistinguishable from the flow of traffic. Society no longer observes a pause; the disappearance of an individual no longer affects its continuity. Everything in town goes on as if nobody died anymore.”<sup>10</sup>

Sociologist Glennys Howarth argues that it was shortly before Ariès’ book was published that “the denial of death thesis” emerged. It had resulted, she explains, from the influence on scholars of Sigmund Freud’s conception of denial as a shield against trauma.<sup>11</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, such sociologists as Briton Geoffrey Gorer, who influenced Ariès,<sup>12</sup> regarded death as practically a new form of pornography, so “shameful” had it become for modern people.<sup>13</sup> Yet Ariès and Gorer are good examples of why forms of explanation that rely on grand narratives – such as “individualization” or other modernist paradigms – have fallen out of favor in recent decades. For what is so striking about both scholars is that they for the most part viewed attitudes toward death in a strange state of abstraction from the catastrophic events of mass death – the world wars and the Holocaust – that unfolded even in their own lifetimes, involved members of their own nations, and brought human beings into close contact with death and corpses in unprecedented ways.<sup>14</sup>

What motivates the present study is a desire to bridge the distance scholars like Ariès and Gorer maintained when discussing attitudes toward death

10 Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 560.

11 Glennys Howarth, *Death and Dying: A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2007), 31.

12 Allan Mitchell, “Philippe Ariès and the French Way of Death,” *French Historical Studies* 10: 4 (Autumn 1978): 684–95.

13 Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (Salem: Ayer, 1987; first published in 1965).

14 Luc Capdevila and Danièle Voldman, *War Dead: Western Societies and the Casualties of War*, trans. Richard Veasey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) manages to stick to the modernizing narrative of Ariès while still being attentive to the close proximity between the dead and the living in the first half of the twentieth century.

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[More information](#)

from the very real and devastating experience of death in twentieth-century Europe. In a century of “pain and prosperity,” death was undeniably among the most vivid and vividly remembered of Berliners’ experiences from World War I to the end of the 1950s. Over the course of those decades, Berliners demonstrated a deep-seated sense of social and personal obligation toward the dead that transcended religion, class, and politics. Far from being disconnected from death, Berliners at times showed an obsessive connection to it.

## HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Death during World War II is in many ways at the center of this narrative. But one of the book’s primary objectives is to draw out the contrasts between Berliners’ perceptions and experiences of death and how their social existence was reshaped by relations with the dead in each of two “postwars” – the temporally indistinct periods that followed World War I and II. The book begins by exploring the ongoing and long-term effects of World War I on views and practices of death in the late Weimar and early Nazi periods. It shows that when war came again, in 1939, Berliners’ memories of death in World War I were an immediate reference point for understanding World War II deaths; that is, until the all-embracing reality of death in World War II began to extract its full measure, for *this* experience of war and death was unlike anything anyone in Berlin had ever seen before. After 1945, Berliners would again confront the consequences of mass death, just as they had done after 1918, but under vastly different material, political, ideological, and social circumstances *and* in the context of the occupation and then division of their city.

Looking back over the last century’s unprecedented bloodshed around the globe, it is hard now to imagine what a breach was opened up in the world by the dehumanizing, machine-driven, mass killing of World War I. The impact of that war’s multiple ruptures on human lives and thought and the world it destroyed and the world it produced continue to be a subject of interest to historians, many of whom see it as the defining event in the “birth of the modern.” In Germany, one of the great losers of the Great War, millions of deaths cast a very long and very dark shadow, one that colored almost any area of life we might care to mention – from politics, to language, to gender and other social relationships, to morality, aesthetics, and art. Chapter 1 shows that, more than a decade after World War I, the dead continued to haunt Berlin’s living, seeming to accuse them of neglecting

Cambridge University Press

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Monica Black

Excerpt

[More information](#)

their memory and their holy sacrifice for a greater Germany.<sup>15</sup> This had a variety of effects on the city's burial culture. It thoroughly discredited the Kaiserreich and its elaborate, embellished funerals and cemeteries. How did it reflect on the nation, some reformers asked, that so many young men had ended their lives face down and abandoned in a trench, while at home the rich continued to have fancy burials? This thought, and a desire to distance Germany from what many Berliners in Weimar saw as the soulless self-aggrandizement and individualism of the imperial period, led to calls for reform from the left and the right.

Yet there was perhaps no other political organization in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s that took more seriously the "holy sacrifice" of the World War I dead or took more radical steps to redeem their deaths than the Nazis. As adherents of the Nazi movement would perennially claim, the Third Reich itself had been born in the trenches of World War I, from the deaths of millions of young German men. The Nazis insisted on the regenerative and creative powers of an expressly masculine and unflinchingly heroic death. This is just one example of the cosmological impulse – the desire to remake the world on wholly new terms – that they manifested in their ideas about death. That impulse took many forms, as I describe in Chapter 2. After Hitler came to power in 1933, partisans of the Nazi new order would begin reinventing the rituals, practices, and spaces of death in Berlin in ways that were linked to the goal of creating not just a racial state but a racial civilization. Forms of honoring the dead were to be purified of "foreign" elements, just as surely as racial "outsiders" were purged from "German" cemeteries. In Nazi Berlin and beyond, the practices of death became a way of fundamentally separating Germans from those marked by the Nazis as the mortal enemy, whose very existence was perceived as hostile to German life: the Jews.

With the beginning of World War II, existing ideas about heroic and sacrificial battlefield death took on new meanings. The bodies and blood

15 It is important to note here that the German word for sacrifice, *Opfer*, is also the word for victim. This can produce a good bit of semantic difficulty when one is moving between German and English texts. As other historians have done, I have tried to show, over the course of this narrative, the varying uses and nuances of the word "sacrifice" in different moments in time. For other discussions of the meanings of sacrifice in German history, see Frank Biess, *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), especially Chapter 1; Sabine Behrenbeck, "The Transformation of Sacrifice: German Identity between Heroic Narrative and Economic Success," in Paul Betts and Greg Eghigian, eds., *Pain and Prosperity: Reconsidering Twentieth-Century German History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Greg Eghigian and Matthew Paul Berg, eds., *Sacrifice and National Belonging in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Arlington: Texas A&M University Press, 2002).

Cambridge University Press

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Monica Black

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of dead German soldiers were reconceived as instruments of colonization, through which foreign lands would be remade as homeland, or *Heimat*. However, this reconfiguration of space had as its direct counterpart the simultaneous destruction of Jews, Poles, and other racial outsiders. Meanwhile, in Berlin, at the highest levels of the regime, there was concern about how Berliners and other Germans would respond to revisiting the pain of the past as large numbers of young men began to lose their lives in the war. However, as Germany's armies sped from one improbably quick victory to another, such fears proved premature; Berliners displayed a remarkable fortitude in the face of mass death on the battlefield and demanded that war deaths be specially honored.

But the defining experience of death for most Berliners over the years 1939 to 1945 was yet to come: the air war. It is to that experience that we turn in Chapter 3. This time around, the experience of "total war" would be categorically different from what took place between 1914 and 1918. Civilians would now be pulled into the conflict in unprecedented ways that not merely blurred but obliterated the distinction between combatant and noncombatant. Whole cities were erased by Allied bombs and the fires they ignited, which destroyed hundreds of thousands of lives. Ordinary Berliners had to journey to "corpse collection sites" (*Leichensammelstellen*) to recover the burned and partial bodies of their dead. Once the ground war made it to Germany, civilians – and not infrequently, women – lost their lives as they became the targets of marauding armies. Berliners were forced to bury their own dead, an experience many perceived as symbolic of Germany's total collapse – material, military, and moral. Still, the racial distinctions erected around death beginning in 1933 were maintained, almost to the last minute of the war.

Emotional responses were different this time, too. Mass death in World War I had produced overwhelming feelings of distress and anxiety and sorrow. In the latter stages of World War II, in the face of the insistent Nazi valorization of wartime death, both soldierly and civilian, German society evinced apathy, detachment, a "convulsive closing of the injuries."<sup>16</sup> In Weimar, there were heated and even violent debates about the meaning of war deaths and how to commemorate them; under Nazism, these debates were suppressed. Grief was driven underground; tears were not commensurate with the dignity of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. This produced an emotional

16 Michael Geyer, "The Place of the Second World War in German Memory and History," *New German Critique* 71 (Spring–Summer 1997): 17.