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The German Comedy

Peter Schneider's second book, The German Comedy: Scenes of Life After the Wall, is an examination of how Germans dealt with and are continuing to deal with the reunification of Germany. He does not limit the scope of his examination to the traditional definition of a German citizen, what most of the world equated with West Germans until just a few years ago. Along with discussing ex-East Germans, he addresses issues concerning German people in the rest of the old Eastern Bloc, particularly ethnic Germans in Poland, Hungary, Romania, and the former Soviet Union.

When the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989, it was a most symbolic turn towards the final goal of reuniting the two parts of Germany that had been separated following World War II. Within a period of a few months, East and West Germany as distinct political entities had ceased to exist; in their place a reunified German state had emerged. On a map, the reunification was quite easy. Eliminating one black line could show the world the new unified nation.

The reunification of the German people was not nearly so simple, and this difficulty is the thrust of Schneider's book. That some West Germans soon came to include East Germans as foreigners (10) is indicative of a mindset that did not only come

from the political right-wing. The initial effects were not the same for people from either side of the fallen Wall. The East Germans were free after living under a repressive regime for fifty years; the West Germans suddenly found themselves inundated with poor, economically underdeveloped, wide-eyed newcomers.

There is a certain amount of truth to the concept of East Germans as foreigners in a united Germany. Their post-W.W.II history runs along similar lines to much of the Eastern Bloc. Forced subjugation to the Soviet system created a political structure that was more puppet of the master than administration of the State. Though the Socialist Unity Party continued to exist and function after reunification, the East German government as it stood disappeared and East Germans had to struggle to understand and accept the West German democratic system. There is no doubt that West Germany enjoyed distinct advantages over the East; over that fact there is little debate. Incorporating millions of underprivileged and underdeveloped people into a thriving political and social system was bound to create animosity and misunderstanding.

Schneider devotes his final chapter to an engaging discussion of the fate of dogs. The East German army used upwards of 5,000 dogs, mostly German shepherds, to patrol their length of the Iron Curtain. The fate of these dogs became, for a short time, part of a heated debate that is an analogy for how West Germans may have subconsciously felt about their new East German companions. The West German German Shepherd

Association stated that the dogs were "dangerous," would be "difficult to integrate," and were "scarcely capable of being reeducated for normal daily life." (209) These descriptions lend insight into how many West Germans surely felt about their new citizens.

The East Germans as a people were not particularly dangerous, though the ideas they had been subjected to for the past fifty years were troublesome to say the least. They would be difficult to integrate; the two philosophical sides of the Wall were disparate opposites and the political systems could not be reconciled. The East was forced to learn a new system. The infrastructure of the East was no doubt substandard by Western standards, which could cause significant delays in the transmission of new information to Easterners and aid in misinformation and misunderstanding across cultures.

He completes the metaphor by describing the resettled shepherds. They are ^{now} used to Western dog food, unafraid of elevators and escalators, and eager to learn. By following this example, one must dispute that the East Germans are incapable of reeducation. The uncertain qualities of human nature are many; the one certain aspect of human nature is that people will try to better themselves in any way available to them. The East Germans could be expected to rise to the challenge, finally free to do what was necessary to improve themselves and their society.

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A few
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Schneider takes the German shepherd metaphor one step too far when he relates the dogs' return to their old patrolling behavior when they are near the vicinity of the fallen Wall. He attests that they "move as if tethered by an unseen leash, with absolute certainty, following the old border along its wild zigzags through the city" and ends the book with a disclaimer, "...perhaps this story is only a legend—like the Wall itself." (212)

This part of the metaphor is incorrect; the East Germans would not allow themselves to be led like dogs back into the subjugation and repression they are now free from. Schneider's disclaimer is condescending and difficult to accept. The trained behavior of the dogs will disappear when their lives end; their puppies will spend their whole lives as regular pets. The effects of the Communist regime on the East German citizens cannot be unlearned as easily.

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