Uncovering their Stories: The Rubble of Memory and the Bombing War

In *A Foreign Affair* (1948), Billy Wilder’s wonderfully satirical film about the American occupation of postwar Germany, an Army officer, Colonel Plummer from Indiana, takes a group of fact-finding representatives from Congress on a tour of destroyed Berlin. While conscientious Congresswoman Frost sees what to her are disturbing signs of GI fraternization with German women at every turn (including the sight of a woman pushing a typically German baby carriage bedecked with two crisply fluttering American flags, looking eerily like those cars of more recent vintage celebrating support for American troops in Iraq), the male members eagerly watch young boys play baseball among the ruins. “This is one of our youth clubs”, Plummer tells his charges:

> We’ve got a lot of them now in the American Zone. We have quite a problem on our hands. Those weren’t ordinary youngsters when we came in. They were mean old men. Now we’re trying to make kids of them again. We had to kick the goosestep out of them, cure them of blind obedience, and teach them to beef with the referee.¹ If they feel like stealing, make sure it’s second base.

After a pause and a loopy remark by one of the Congressmen about the kids not having to worry about breaking any windows, Plummer concludes: “One family has already christened a kid DiMaggio Schulz. That’s when I started believing we really won the war”. The scene ends with a disputed call at home plate, each Congressman joining in the fray.

Although baseball may well be the only aspect of American life that has *not* captured the German imagination, the image of German youngsters trading in their Hitler Youth shorts for the ragtag outfits of a sandlot ballgame serves as a superb parable of the reeducation and democratization of a people emerging from the mental habits promoted by a disgraced ideology and the physical and moral effects caused by a brutally prosecuted war. From the perspective of over half-century later, it certainly comes as no surprise that reeducation would wear the guise of something as quintessentially American as baseball, that democratization should, in effect, be displayed as the equivalent of Americanization. Maybe it was not as simple as training march-weary legs in the fine art of sliding into home plate or adopting the moniker “DiMaggio”, but any visitor

¹ Austrian-born Wilder, who enjoyed a masterly command of the nuances of American English, incongruently uses the word “referee” where “umpire” belongs. Apparently “Colonel Plummer” did not have the heart to correct him.
touring Germany today will be quick to note the telltale signs of success: from the titles of American films (often un-translated) on virtually every movie marquee, the sound of American and American-inspired music broadcast ceaselessly over the radio and played live in clubs and “open air” stadiums, and the ubiquitous presence of English words and phrases where once a flexible German language managed quite well to do the work, all the way to the spectacle of present-day German youth, certainly no longer goose-stepping “mean old men”, strutting their liberated, hip-hop selves across dance floor and town square.

Yet, all of this did not happen overnight. As OMGUS polls showed, despite the Berlin Air-Lift, Hollywood, Coca-Cola, and rock-‘n’-roll, anti-American feelings lingered in Germany until the building of the Berlin Wall (in 1961) and the visit by a youthful American president, John F. Kennedy (in 1963), whose touching, if grammatically problematical, pledge of allegiance to the city of Berlin in a time of trouble was enthusiastically received and appreciated. The immediate reaction of the war generation was to survive, forget, and move on. Indeed, as thematized in many of the “rubble films” immediately after the war, the ability to forget, the ability to repress the unpleasant experiences at the front and on the “home front”, was seen as a precondition for facing often equally unpleasant postwar conditions in Germany’s urban ruins and a very uncertain physical and political future. The reward for German industriousness, based on necessary repression of memory, was the so-called economic miracle that followed the currency reform of 1948 and led to the reintegration of the West German state into an equally revived Western Europe. The reward for German forgetting, in other words, was the beginning of the Americanization we see so prominent today. The price paid, however, was the much maligned German inability to mourn, that is, the Germans’ apparent reluctance, if not outright refusal, to accept unconditional responsibility for the horrific brutalities of the war in particular and the Nazi era in general, especially those concerning the expulsion, dispossession and eventual murder of millions of European Jews in the name of a twisted duty to “improve” the world by ridding it of its vermin. Above all, at least until each of the two new German states was enlisted into the ranks of rival Cold War empires and rearmed for combat by the mid-1950s, reeducation for the Allied occupiers, especially the Americans, meant graphically and repeatedly pressing the awareness of guilt upon the retinas and consciousness of individual Germans by means of photographs, film, radio broadcasts, and print. That the message was received is indisputable. How it was processed and why it was processed in the way it was remains a matter of scrutiny and debate.

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