

CURRENT BOOKS

City of Forgetting

FAUST'S METROPOLIS:

A History of Berlin

By Alexandra Richie. Carroll & Graf. 891 pp. \$37.95

by Amy E. Schwartz

Visitors to what used to be West Berlin usually start at the Kaiser Wilhelm *Gedächtniskirche*, or Memorial Church, a neo-Gothic cathedral dedicated in 1895 and reduced to a single towering fragment by an Allied bombing raid in 1944. Instead of either rebuilding it or letting it crumble, imaginative preservationists in 1961 framed the ruined tower with a blocky, hypermodern structure of blue-green glass, offering the tourist's camera a satisfyingly jarring image of a city marked by wrenching changes from civilization to barbarism and from pride to disaster. Step closer, though, and you see that at least in this one spot, Berliners have been able to address, directly and honestly, this most dreadful aspect of their history. A plaque at the foot of the ruined tower gives the circumstances of its dedication and destruction, then adds that the fragment is preserved as a memorial to that destruction "and to the judgment of God upon this people."

Early in the introduction to her gigantic history of Berlin, *Faust's Metropolis*, Alexandra Richie lays out the city's claim to attention in sweeping and grandiose terms: "No other city on earth has had such a turbulent history; no other capital has repeatedly become so powerful and then fallen so low." Even the most heartily Berlin-obsessed reader is likely to goggle slightly at this. Not Rome, Jerusalem, Babylon?

As it turns out, though, Richie's narrative does not depend on these claims; nor does she seem fully to believe them herself. In describing pre-Bismarck Berlin, from the centuries of its Slavic prehistory up through the depredations of the Thirty Years' War and the repeatedly dashed pretensions of the Hohenzollerns, she notes

again and again that the city was a provincial backwater with nothing to compare to Paris or London. Only in the last century and a half does "imperial Berlin" embark on the series of wild gyrations that marks it off from other cities, from the abortive revolution of March 1848 to its collapse, from the burst of growth and wealth brought on by industrialization and German unification under Bismarck to the breakdown that followed World War I, from the "Golden Twenties" of Weimar to the madness of Nazism and the city's subsequent quick reincarnations as defeated rubble heap, Cold War flashpoint, divided symbol of a divided Europe, and, finally, reunified capital and city of the future.

In rehearsing this familiar tale, Richie pursues a narrower and more telling point: that in no other city have the inhabitants gone so blithely and with such bad political judgment from upswing to upswing. Her argument, emerging gradually (not to say excruciatingly) over nearly 900 pages, is that Berliners have flung themselves into each of these new developments with an extraordinary degree of willed amnesia; that Berlin remains "a city of myth, of legend, and of the deliberate manipulation of history"; and that this quality makes it dangerously vulnerable to the perpetual dream of a *Stunde Null*, or "zero hour"—the moment of fresh start and complete reinvention that will spare its inhabitants the pain of confronting the past. In particular, the persistent "19th-century myth" of *Berliner Unwille*, or stubborn resistance to authority, has allowed the city's inhabitants to nurse a self-image of resistance to the Nazis while dodging the fact that virtually all the atrocity, mur-

der, and madness of the Holocaust was planned and directed from Berlin, by people living in Berlin, under the noses of manifestly indifferent Berliners, and in Berliner-staffed offices.

Richie is essentially saying that Berlin is short on sites of honest reckoning such as the *Gedaechtniskirche* (whose structure she mentions several times, but not its plaque). Her indictment carries resonance for anyone who has lived in Berlin and pondered the strange could-be-anywhere quality of large stretches of the city and the oddly submerged quality of much of the history that remains.

In the wake of Allied bombing that destroyed the vast majority of the old housing stock, postwar planners in West Berlin plunged into modern architecture as if to eradicate any hint that a previous city had existed. On the eastern side, communist makeovers of showplaces such as the Alexanderplatz accomplished more or less the same goal, though lack of resources kept the obliteration from being anywhere near as comprehensive. The fall of the Wall and plans for the renewed capital—to be moved to Berlin from Bonn by the end of the century—have likewise set off a tremendous frenzy of demolition and building on “Europe’s largest construction site,” with grand plans promising to sweep away any hint of the No Man’s Land scar and other inconvenient geographical landmarks. Richie notes that city authorities in recent years have urged destruction of such finds as Nazi bunkers, on the ground—shaky, if you think about it—that they might become neo-Nazi shrines.

“The city changes identities like a snake sloughing its skin,” the author writes. “The political upheaval itself has been bad enough, but more worrying is the way in which Berliners have responded to it, leading outsiders to suspect that whatever Berliners are today, the status quo might not last for long. . . . It may seem unfair, but Berlin will have to work hard to prove

to the world that this ‘democratic phase’ is not merely another passing trend.” This is a biting argument, all the more so coming from a writer who describes herself as a lover of German culture and a frequent resident of Berlin, on both sides before the Wall fell and also after, with family connections there going back to the 14th century.

Alas, it is an argument that comes into focus only occasionally as Richie struggles with a mass of information that seems beyond her control. Instead of primary material documenting or making vivid her assertions about Berliners’ behavior through the ages, we get baggy narratives of the horrors of the Thirty Years’ War, medieval tortures, and



Napoleon’s Russian campaign; an excellent description of German Romanticism but none, weirdly, of Wagner; and a 55-page, desperately repetitive chapter on the fall of Berlin to the Russians.

Even where Richie’s material is relevant to the argument, it is oddly deployed. Discussing, in her afterword, the modern city’s plans for a Holocaust memorial, she once again asserts that Berliners bear undeniable responsibility for the horrors. A footnote cites a lengthy translation of a stomach-turning 1942 document, issued from Berlin and unearthed by Claude Lanzmann in his film *Shoah*, concerning the details of a design for gas vans. It is indeed damning, famously so, with its discussions of weight-and-balance limits and

the tendency of the “load” to rush toward the back of the vehicle once the “operation” commences. For sheer evidentiary firepower, it may be the most powerful document in the book. But if it is intended as the keystone of Richie’s argument about moral responsibility, what on earth is it doing in the afterword, and in a footnote?

The author’s argument suffers too from a lack of comparison with other cities, even other German cities. Berliners will tell you that Berlin hated the Nazis, laughed at them as boors. But even in Nuremberg, people will cite election figures to show they never *really* supported Hitler—and Nuremberg has no *Gedaechtniskirche* or Reichstag, but a medieval sector rebuilt so perfectly that you’d never know it had been bombed. Berliners may have had doubts about resuming their status as capital and griped at the inconveniences of reunifying their city, but the very action of being forced to do so has meant endless confrontations with the historical ghosts Richie rightly wants to see given their due.

In her afterword, Richie suggests a more cautious and ultimately more workable definition of the moral culpability of her city, one drawn from Klaus Mann’s *Mephisto* (1936), the story of a Berlin actor who starts out in the leftist opposition to the Nazis and is imperceptibly drawn into a level of collaboration and guilt that he never saw coming. “The warning of

Mephisto,” Richie writes, “is that a person makes his moral choice much earlier than he thinks.” This sidesteps the fairly important question of whether there are any moral gradations between the writer of the memo about the gas vans and a Berliner who “merely” turned the other way as Jews were marched onto trains. Still, it is a valuable insight, one that condemns what ordinary Berliners did in the presence of extreme evil, but in terms that make it possible to connect that behavior to less spectacular failures, theirs and others’, throughout history.

The idea that an individual, and likewise a nation, can fall into coresponsibility for ultimate evil merely by missing the chance to get off the bus is a persistent and chilling theme of this chilling century. Richie’s evocation of it calls to mind the classic statement by the Polish poet and Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz in his early postwar poem about the end of the world. On the day the world ends, a bee buzzes sleepily in a flower, people go about their business, nothing much seems to have changed—except that a prophet by the riverside

who is too busy to be a prophet
mutters over and over again to his nets:
“There will be no other end of the world,
There will be no other end of the world.”

> AMY SCHWARTZ writes about cultural issues for the Washington Post.

Defining Disease

MAKING SENSE OF ILLNESS:

Science, Society, and Disease.

By Robert A. Aronowitz, M.D.

Cambridge Univ. Press. 267 pp. \$29.95

by *Richard Restak*

A successful attorney suddenly begins feeling listless and exhausted. Finding nothing amiss despite extensive tests, her doctors react with impatience, finally suggesting that she consult a psychiatrist. Eventually, and to her immense

relief, another internist assures her that she does indeed suffer from an illness, chronic fatigue syndrome. The first doctors concentrated singlemindedly on a search for objective, testable criteria of disease; the last doctor heeded her sub-