Into the Darkness: An Uncensored Report from Inside the Third Reich at War

by Lothrop Stoddard

1940

Chapter 2: Berlin Blackout

My entry into Berlin was not a cheering one. The train was nearly two hours late and there was no diner, so I had had nothing except the traditional cowpuncher's breakfast a sip of water and a cigarette. The chill autumnal air made me shiver as I stepped from the train. Porters, it seemed, were scarce in wartime Germany, and I was fortunate to preempt one to carry my abundant hand luggage.

My first job was to get some German money, for I hadn't a pfennig to my name. You can't legally buy Reichsmarks abroad. What the traveler does is to take out a letter of credit before he leaves his native land. While in Germany he draws on this and gets what is known as Registered Marks which are much cheaper than the official quotation of 2.4 to the dollar. I bought my letter of credit in New York at the rate of nearly five to the dollar. That meant a twenty-cent mark a saving of almost 100 per. cent. The traveler is supposed to use this money only for living expenses, and every draft is entered on his passport as well as on his letter of credit, thus enabling the authorities to check up on what he has spent when he leaves Germany. However, the allowance is liberal, and unless his drafts indicate that he has been buying a good deal, he will have no trouble. Of course, one gets ordinary currency. The Registered Mark is merely a bookkeeping phrase. At one of the bureaus maintained at every large railway station I drew enough cash to last me for a few days, then my porter found me

one of the few taxis available. Both cab and driver were of ancient vintage, but they rattled me safely to my hotel. This was the famous Adlon, situated on Berlin's main avenue, Unter den Linden.

Adlon Hotel

While unpacking I had the pleasure of a telephone call from a German named Sallett whom I had informed of my coming. I had known him when he was attached to the German Embassy in Washington. Now he was in the American Section of the Foreign Office, so I counted on him to start me right. Since the day was Sunday there was nothing officially to be done, but he asked me to meet him at lunch for a preliminary chat and to come to his home for dinner that same evening.

Before keeping my luncheon date, however, I took care to equip myself with food-cards those precious bits of paper on which one's very life depends. Incidentally they are not cards, but blocks of coupons, reminiscent of the trading-stamps issued by some of our department stores. The clerk at the desk inscribed my name in a big book and handed me a week's supply in the shape of little blocks of coupons variously colored. Each coupon is good for so many grams of bread, butter, meat, and other edibles. Every time you eat a meal you

must tear off the various coupons required for each dish, the amount being printed on the bill of fare. And the waiter must collect them when you give your order, because he in turn must hand them in to the kitchen before he can bring you your food. This has nothing to do with price. In the last analysis, each of these food-coupons is what the Germans call a Bezugschein an official permit to purchase an article of a specific kind and quality. Let me illustrate: You want to buy some meat. Each of your meat coupons entitles you to so many grams. You may go into an inexpensive restaurant and get the cheapest grade of sausage or you can go into the best hotel and get a finely cooked filet mignon. The price will differ enormously, but the number of meat coupons you hand over is precisely the same.


Wirtschaftsgruppe Elektroindustrie
a/s
Reichsstelle für elektrotechnische Erzeugnisse
RelE
C
Serie C
I M. E.
Bezugschein
für
einen Rundfunk-Markenempfänger
Der Reichsbeauftragte
für elektrotechnische Erzeugnisse

Bezugschein food coupon

I needed to take along my food-cards even though I had been invited to lunch. In Germany, no matter how wealthy your host may be, he has no more coupons than anyone else and so cannot furnish them for his guests. That is true of all meals in hotels or restaurants. It does not apply when the host invites you to his own home. He then has to do all the honors. This severely limits domestic hospitality. In such cases the guests are usually served fish, game, or some other delicacy for which food cards are not required.

Kaiserhof Hotel

Dr. Sallett had asked me to lunch with him at the Kaiserhof, a well-known hotel some distance down the Wilhelmstrasse. It is the Nazi social headquarters, and when prominent members of the Party come to Berlin from the provinces they usually stop there. Sallett met me in the lobby, resplendent in a gray diplomatic uniform cut with the swank which military tailors know how to attain. Being Sunday, the usual weekday crowd was lacking in the dining room. Those who were present seemed to be much of a type vigorous men, mostly in their thirties or forties, some of them hard-faced and all with an air of assurance and authority. Nearly all of them wore the Party emblem, a button about the size of a half-dollar bearing a red swastika on a white background.

Party emblem button

My first meal in the Third Reich was a distinct success. As might have been expected in this preeminent Nazi hostelry, the food was good and the service quick. The imitation coffee, an Ersatz made of roasted barley, was banal, but it was remedied by an excellent pony of old German brandy. Thereafter, my friend Sallett explained to me the various things I must do in order to get going without loss of time.

New Chancellery

When we had parted until evening, I strolled back along the Wilhelmstrasse to get the feel of my new abode. I noted how the famous street had architecturally had its face lifted since I was there a decade before. Across the broad square from the Kaiserhof stood the new Chancery, while on the opposite side of the street was the equally new Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda an institution I was to know extremely well, since all foreign correspondents fall under its special jurisdiction. Both buildings typify the new Nazi architecture their exteriors severely plain, whatever magnificence may be within. This is a conscious reaction from the ornate exaggerations of the old Empire style, which is frowned on as vulgar and tasteless.

Reich Chancellery

Just beyond the Chancery is the rather modest old eighteenth century palace which is Adolf Hitler's official residence. It sets well back from the street behind a high iron railing. Above its gabled roof floated a special swastika flag to denote that Der Fuehrer was at home. That is the way Germans always speak of him. Very rarely do they use his name. With a sort of impersonal reverence, he is Der Fuehrer, The Leader, in Teutonic minds. The railing before the palace has two gates through which motor cars can enter and leave by a semicircular drive. These gates were guarded by Security Police, nicknamed Schupos, in green uniforms and visored black leather hats. Before the entrance to the palace itself stood two military sentries in field gray. Across the street clustered a large group of sightseers, gazing silently at their leader's residence. Even on weekdays one can always find such onlookers from dawn to dusk, after which loitering on the Wilhelmstrasse is not allowed.

The streets were well filled with Sunday strollers, and since the misting rain of the forenoon had let up, I thought it a good opportunity to get a look at the

holiday crowds. I therefore walked for an hour or more up and down Unter den Linden, around the Pariser Platz, and finally back to my hotel. My outstanding impression of these wartime Berliners was a thoroughgoing impassivity. They seemed stolidly casual with expressionless faces. Almost never did I see a really animated conversation; neither was there laughter or even a smile. Twice I dropped briefly into a cafe. In both cases the patrons sat chatting quietly, and from snatches of talk I overheard the conversation was wholly about personal or local affairs. Not once did I catch a discussion of the war or other public matters.

Uniforms naturally abounded. Soldiers, obviously on Sunday liberty, passed and re-passed, sometimes in large groups. They never sauntered but clumped along at a fair pace, their hobnailed boots clashing heavily upon the pavement. Most of them had fine physique and all looked well nourished and generally fit. Now and then I saw a Nazi storm-trooper clad in brown with a red swastika arm band. More often I encountered a black-uniformed S.S. man the Party's Schutz Staffeln, or Elite Guard. Twice I passed groups of Hitler Youth, boys dressed entirely in dark blue, from cloth hat to baggy ski--trousers tucked into high boots.

There was much punctilious saluting. The soldiers gave the army salute, a quick touch of the fingers to helmet or forage cap. The others gave the stiff-armed Nazi greeting.

The most interesting example of Berlin's impassive popular mood was the attitude toward the tightly closed British Embassy which is just around the corner from the Adlon. There it stands, with gilded lions and unicorns upon its portals. I had rather expected that this diplomatic seat of the archenemy would attract some attention, especially on a Sunday, when this part of town was thronged with outside visitors. Yet, though I watched closely for some time, I never saw a soul give the building more than a passing glance, much less point to it or demonstrate in any way.

British Embassy in Berlin

Another surprising thing was how well dressed the people appeared. I saw many suits and overcoats which had obviously been worn a long time, but invariably they were tidy and clean. At the moment I thought this good showing was because everyone was wearing Sunday best, but I could detect little difference on subsequent days. In fact wherever I went in Germany the people dressed about the same. Nowhere did I see ragged, unkempt persons. I was told that the cheaper fabrics, made largely of wood synthetics mixed with shoddy, absorb dampness quickly, get heavy, and are hard to dry out. Nevertheless, they look good, though I doubt the efficacy of their resistance to rain and cold.

One thing those clothes did lack, however, and that was style. The range of models was small, and they were obviously designed for service rather than smartness. Overcoats were mostly of the ulster type, and that goes for the women too. While I did see a considerable number of ladies who were well-dressed according to our standards, the average Berlin female, with her ulsterette or raincoat, her plain felt hat, her cotton stockings, and her low-heeled shoes, rarely warrants a second look. I may add that she uses little or no make-up and seldom has her hair waved. Such beautifying is frowned upon by strict Nazis as unpatriotic.

A street scene in central Berlin

My first stroll indicated another thing confirmed by subsequent observation. This is that Berlin remains what it always was a city lacking both color and the indefinable charm of antiquity. Its architecture is monotonous, and the drab effect is heightened by its misty northern climate. Most of the autumn season is cloudy with frequent light rain. Even on so--called clear days the low hanging sun shines wanly through a veil of mist.

By this time the early autumn dusk was falling, so I returned to the Adlon. I did not dress for my evening appointment because in wartime Germany one rarely wears even a dinner jacket. A double-breasted dark suit is deemed ample for almost all occasions. My friends the Salletts lived some distance away from my hotel, but I had ordered a taxi so I was sure of transportation. The taxi situation is one of the many drawbacks to life in wartime Berlin. Because of the strict rationing of gasoline, taxis are scarce even by day and scarcer still at night. They

are supposed to be used only for business or necessity, so drivers are not allowed to take you to any place of amusement, even to the opera. Neither do they cruise the streets for fares, so unless you know a regular cab stand you can almost never pick one up.

Hotel Adlon lobby

The hotel lobby was brilliantly lighted when I descended, but thick curtains had been drawn across the entrance. I slipped through them to encounter that most trying of all wartime Berlin's phenomena, the Verdunklung, or blackout. As I emerged through the swing-doors it hit me literally like a blow in the face. The misting rain had begun again, and it was dark as a pocket. The broad avenue of Unter den Linden was a maw of blackness.

Not a street light except the cross--slitted traffic signals at the nearby corner of the Wilhelmstrasse. They were hardly needed for the few motor cars and occasional buses that crawled slowly by. Well might they drive cautiously, for their headlights were hooded save for a tiny orifice emitting a dim ray. As I stood on the sidewalk waiting for my taxi, pedestrians picked their way warily in the inky gloom, sensed rather than seen. Some of them wore phosphorescent buttons to avoid collisions with other passers-by. Others used small electric lamps to guide their steps, flashing them off quickly and always holding them

pointed downward toward the ground. Any other use of a flashlight is strictly prohibited. To turn it upward to read a street sign or find a house number rates a warning shout from one of the policemen who seem to be everywhere after dark. Indeed, such action may lead to arrest and a fifty-mark fine, which at par is about twenty dollars.

I entered my taxi with some trepidation. How was the driver going to find my friend's address, avoid collisions, or even keep to the roadway on a night like this? Yet he seemed to know his business, for he forged steadily onward, with many mysterious turns and twists through the maze of unseen streets and avenues. As for me, I could not see even the houses on either hand, though I sensed their looming presence and marveled at the thought of all the life and light pent in behind numberless shrouded windows. The only visible objects were pinpoint lights of approaching motor cars and occasional trams or buses which clattered past like noisy ghosts. They were lit within by tiny blue bulbs revealing shadow passengers. Wartime Berlin had indeed become a "*city of dreadful night.*" No description can adequately convey the depressing, almost paralyzing, effect. It must be lived to be understood.

At length my taxi halted. The driver flashed a light which showed a couple of doorways quite close together. "*It must be one of those two,*" he said, as I got out and paid him. Fortunately I had with me a flashlight brought from America. It was small as a fountain pen and could be clipped into my vest pocket. The sight of it never failed to evoke envious admiration from German acquaintances. Heedless of lurking policemen, I flashed its tiny beam upward at the house number which, as usual, was perched on the tip top of a high door. It was not the right place. I tried the next door. It had no number and seemed to be disused. I tried the next house. The numbers were running the wrong way. Meanwhile the misty drizzle had increased to a smart downpour.

Feeling utterly helpless, I determined to seek information; so I pressed the button to the first floor apartment and as the latch clicked I went inside. As I walked across the hallway the apartment entrance opened and a pleasant-faced young woman stood in the doorway. I explained the situation, stating that I was a total stranger. Her face grew sympathetic, then set in a quick frown.

"*You say that taxi man didn't make sure?*" she exclaimed. "*Ach, how stupid! The fellow ought to be reported. Wait a minute and I'll show you myself.*" She disappeared, returning a moment later wearing a raincoat.

I protested that I could find my way from her directions, but she would have none of it. "*No, no,*" she insisted. "*Such treatment to a newly arrived foreigner! I*

am bound to make up for that driver's inefficiency." Together we sallied forth into the pattering rain. On the way she explained that my friend's apartment house, though listed as on her street, had its entrance just around the corner on another avenue. She thought that also very stupid.

Arriving as I did somewhat late, I found the others already there.

To my great pleasure the chief guest was Alexander Kirk, our Charge d'Affaires in Berlin. He is doing a fine diplomatic job in a most difficult post. Generally popular, he does not hesitate to speak plainly when he needs to. And, instead of getting offended, the Germans seem to like him all the better for it. Some weeks later, Mr. Kirk won new laurels by vetoing the usual Thanksgiving celebration of the American colony in a restaurant or hotel. He argued that, when all Germany was strictly rationed, such public feasting would be in bad taste. Instead, he invited his fellow-citizens to a private dinner at his own palatial residence in a fashionable suburb. The Germans considered that the height of tactful courtesy.

The other two guests were Herr Hewel, one of Hitler's confidential advisers, and Dr. Otto Schramm, a leading Berlin surgeon. In the course of the evening, Dr. Schramm told me about a new synthetic fat which had just been invented. Elaborate experiments were being made to produce not only a substitute for soap but also an edible compound to supplement animal fats and vegetable oils. This, he claimed, would soon remedy blockaded Germany's chief dietary danger, since it could be produced from chemical constituents abundantly available. The talk ran late. Fortunately, I was taken back to my hotel in Herr Hewel's car, which, being an official, he could still use.

Brandenburger Tor (Gate)

Just before reaching the Adlon we encountered a column of huge army trucks going up Unter den Linden and out through the Brandenburger Tor. I was afterward told that material and ordnance, routed through Berlin, are usually moved late at night. There must have been plenty of activity on that occasion, for long after I had retired I could hear intermittent rumblings of heavy traffic whose vibrations came to me even through the Adlon's thick walls.

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