

THOUGHTS ARE FREE

Book 2 of the East Berlin Series

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DAY 1

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The noise was neatly quarantined. A hundred people were marching—they were chanting, shouting, jeering.

But in the surrounding streets: silence.

Windows and doors were shut. Shops darkened, shutters rolled down. The only movement was the slow, snaking column of the demonstrators; the only sound was the chanting: *Foreigners go home! German jobs for Germans! Tear down the Wall!*

The skinheads marched at the head of the demonstration, a waddle of goose-steppers leading the pack. Shaven heads, faces contorted with hate, bomber jackets, paraboats with white laces. Behind them bullish men in ill-fitting suits. At the back, a few dozen people, normal people—the kind you could meet on the street, at work or in the queue at the tram stop—shepherded along by a fistful of skins carrying black-red-gold placards: *Germany: one Fatherland.*

How could anyone take them seriously—their self-importance, their stilted arguments? But they'd managed to tap into the fears of our time, they were gaining in strength and numbers. Many people in the GDR were unsettled by current immigration levels—higher than at any time since the end of the war: Russian Jews fleeing persecution, the Vietnamese and the Algerian contract workers stranded by the shipwreck of the Communist regime, the refugees from the Balkan wars, the idealists arriving from other countries, eager to support our cause. And we needed them all; without

their support the labour shortage would bankrupt the country within days.

And a bankrupt GDR would suit the fascists just fine.

Behind the marchers came half a dozen cops, shields dangling from left hands, helmets clipped to their belts.

In the wake of them all came the police lorries. I stood next to the operational commander and his lieutenant on the back of a W50 truck, the tarp pulled back to give us a clear view of the demonstration. A police radio dragged at my shoulder, the earpiece keeping me abreast of the reports being made and the orders being issued.

Concentration anti-fascist repeat anti-fascist demonstrators Jessnerstrasse, crackled the radio. *Concentration Antifa repeat anti-fascist Pettenkoferstrasse*.

“Numbers?” demanded the police lieutenant next to me.

The static stirred, snapping and whistling. We were following the march down Frankfurter Allee and the wide railway bridges over the road ahead of us interfered with radio reception.

“Say again! Say again!” The lieutenant shouted into the microphone, but there was no need. We could see over the heads of the marchers—a black-clad knot of Antifa had run out of a side street on the right. About a dozen of them were wearing motorcycle helmets.

The march in front of us disintegrated. The skins from the back were moving up through the ranks of the followers who cast about themselves, unsure what to do, where to go. A few looked back at the police lines behind, as if seeking advice.

“Squad C into position,” sighed the captain behind us. Without hesitation the lieutenant repeated the order into the radio mike, looking over his shoulder to watch the riot cops jump down from their transports.

In front of us a second group of Antifa emerged from a street on the left, running across the central reservation, spearing into the demonstrators, isolating the skins from the other marchers scattered along the roadway. The cops headed towards the skins who were already encircled by

punks and squatters.

There was a moment of sudden stillness—the skins stood in the roadway, facing outwards in a ragged square, placards ripped off poles to make wooden staves. Around them the anti-fascists, just out of reach. A loose ring of police kettled both groups.

With a shout the action started. The Antifa clumped together and pushed against the skins, who hit back with fists and poles. The police used their truncheons, lashing out without discrimination.

“Disperse them,” murmured the captain. He had turned away and was watching the group of fellow travellers being directed by the couple of cops left near the trucks. A few wanted to stay and watch but most seemed relieved, almost happy to be sent home.

“Disperse, disperse!” shouted the lieutenant into the radio microphone, but there was no-one to hear him. The cops in the *mêlée* didn’t have radios. There weren’t enough of them and they had no plan. They were pumped up on adrenaline and were reacting only to what was happening around them.

It was a mess.



I was in the canteen when the sergeant came to get me. Sitting at a table, all by myself, leaning against the wall and ignoring the cup of coffee and the slice of poppy-seed cake before me. The other tables had been pushed together and cops sat around them, slapping each other on the back and drinking beer.

“Shoulda left them to fight it out! All as bad as each other,” laughed one. “But did you see the fascists’ faces when the Antifa stormed across the road?”

This country was going through so many changes, yet I still found it hard to work alongside those who had once been against us. Before 1989 the police had played their part, shoulder to shoulder with the Party and the Stasi, repressing social and political dissent. But now the Party was no longer

in power and an uneasy dance of reconciliation had started, a wooing between the police and the politicised population. Somehow I'd been caught up in the machinery, assisting the Central Round Table but assigned to the Ministry of the Interior, often working together with cops.

“Comrade Captain Grobe?” A sergeant stood in front of my table, saluting. “We thought you might be interested in something. A detainee we’re interviewing. The duty officer suggested you come to see for yourself.”

He led me up the stairs and down a long corridor of brown polished lino, institutional green walls with heavy, padded doors down one side. He stopped at one of these and pressed the bell set to one side.

While we waited I looked through a grimy window at the courtyard of the police station. A row of trucks were parked up, in front of them stood a dozen or so green and white liveried police patrol cars. There were no signs of life down there, just concrete, becalmed vehicles and the blank windows opposite. Last time I was here—just a few months ago—the yard had been boiling with movement and exhaust fumes as a squad assembled in preparation for a raid on a squat. It hadn't been a pleasant experience for me, even less so for those who were in the squat when the doors were kicked in.

Behind me I heard a door open, and I followed the sergeant into the interview room.

A police lieutenant in uniform was sitting behind a large desk—empty except for a phone and intercom device, and a buff file lying in front of him. The lieutenant held a pen, which he laid down on the thick file as he looked up to see who had entered. In front of his desk a table was set end-on, a couple of chairs to either side.

At a nod from the lieutenant we moved into the room. He didn't say anything, and I kept my silence too. It wasn't until I turned to shut the door that I saw the detainee, sitting on a low stool behind the door; his hands pressed on his thighs, his knees drawn up tight to make room for the door that was pushed against his legs. I quickly looked away, but

not before taking in the stone-washed jeans, the white t-shirt showing arms sheathed in dark tattoos and the heavily greased short-back-and-sides haircut.

The sergeant went to the lieutenant, leaning over his desk to whisper something. A curt nod from the officer, then he left, opening the door carelessly so that it rebounded off the prisoner's knees. I sat down at the table, and the lieutenant slid the file over to me. Flicking through it, I could see the first page was a custody record, presumably for whoever was sat behind the door. After that were a handful of unused statement forms, followed by a few dozen blank pieces of paper. I looked at a virgin, ash-grey sheet, my eyes tracing the splinters of wood in the fibrous paper, then I thumbed back to the custody record, checking the personal data: Andreas Hermann, born Leipzig 1976, detained at the demonstration this evening. An initial charge of rowdy behaviour under paragraph 215 section 1 of the criminal code was being investigated and prepared. I tried to meet the police lieutenant's eye but he was staring at the man on the stool.

"Where were you today at 1600 hours?" he snapped.

The detainee flinched slightly, I wouldn't have noticed if he didn't still have his knees pulled up so tight. The slight jerk of the man's head travelled down his torso and limbs, making his feet tremble. But he gave no answer, continuing to stare at a point somewhere above the lieutenant's shoulder.

"Fine. Tell me: when was the last time you went to Alexanderplatz?"

Again silence, the same stare over the lieutenant's shoulder.

It was a familiar set up. The sterile interview room, the implicit offer of the comfort that a simple chair with a back could provide: a seat at the table versus the reality of the hard stool. The discomfort, the prohibition against leaning against the wall, the indignity of sitting behind the door. Or alternatively the interviewee might be placed in the middle of the room, back to the door, unable to see who was coming

in, whether they were bearing a message, choke cuffs or a cosh.

“Do you go to the Alex often? Meet your friends there? Or do you prefer to hang out in Lichtenberg?”

Silence.

How often had I sat in rooms like this? The endless questions, sometimes in relay, one interviewer replacing the next, only the detainee remaining the same, required to answer the same questions, again and again, hour after hour, day after day.

“But you don’t live in Berlin-Lichtenberg.”

The lack of sleep was worse than the arbitrary beatings. The lack of sleep played with your mind. You no longer knew what time of day it was, whether it was even day or night. You lost track of what you’d said or not said, what you’d meant to say or not say.

“Spend a lot of time there, do you?”

The lack of sleep made you paranoid, unable to trust yourself. It didn’t take long, only a couple of days before exhaustion broke you.

“So you stay at a friend’s?”

But they couldn’t be using those tactics any more? These new times must have put an end to torture?

“Because it’s true, isn’t it, that you spend quite a bit of time in that part of town?”

I looked at the custody record again, as if it would show me what interrogation methods were planned for this Andreas Hermann.

“How much time do you spend at the premises Weitlingstrasse 122?”

This time there was a reaction. The detainee slowly moved his head, away from the spot above the interviewer’s shoulder, slowly sweeping across desk and table, until he was facing me, his hard eyes challenging me.

“Think you’re clever, don’t you? But we have him,” he said, in a slack Berlin drawl, his words whistling through the gap left by missing front teeth. “We know who he is, your *Zecke*, your little informant. And you know what? We know

who you are too. You'll be next. No worries, you'll be next." His head tracked back to its original position, facing the wall, above the lieutenant.

I continued watching the detainee, but out of the corner of my eye I could see that the lieutenant hadn't reacted at all.

"How long have you been registered as living at your mother's address?" the policeman asked.

Silence.