Isaac Deutscher, “East of the Elbe” (October 27, 1945)

Abstract

At the end of World War II, Germans were more afraid of being captured or occupied by the Russians than by the Western Allies. About six months into the Red Army’s occupation and administration of East Germany, journalist and Eastern Europe expert Isaac Deutscher, a British Trotskyite of Polish extraction, offered a cautious assessment: the Russians had succumbed to the desire to revenge German crimes in the Soviet Union only initially and had gone on to focus on reanimating economic and cultural life in their zone. According to Deutscher, the methods they used were by no means strictly totalitarian ones.

Source

Only half a year has passed since the last shots were fired in the battle of Berlin and the Russian invasion of Eastern Germany was completed. Within this brief period the entire social and economic structure of Eastern Germany has changed almost beyond recognition. Germany’s eastern frontier has been shifted westwards, and Berlin now lies almost within the range of the Polish artillery on the Oder. It is as if the distances between the Urals and Lake Baikal and the Spree and the Elbe had suddenly shrunk, as if some fantastic landslide had thrown Leipzig and Dresden into the immediate neighbourhood of Kharkov or Chelabinsk.

When the Red Army entered the lands east of the Elbe, Goebbels’ last gloomy prophecies about the impending “onrush from the steppes” were still ringing in the Germans’ ears. Most Germans knew that they could expect no mercy from the Russians. The driving force behind the “armies of the steppes” was their longing to avenge all the sufferings and humiliations inflicted on Russia by the Third Reich. Millions of Germans fled panic-stricken from Russian revenge; millions more stayed behind, fatalistically resigned to their punishment. On the other hand, in Berlin and other cities, where even after years of Gestapo rule Communists had not been altogether extirpated, the approaching sound of Russian guns aroused a hopeful stir in working-class districts. In the Battle of Berlin, German Communists from Wedding and Neukölln came out to assist the red Army’s assault on Hitler’s last ditch. Most of the Berlin intelligentsia, torn between fatalism and uncertain hope, wondered whether the Russians, after all, might see the advantage of some reconciliation with defeated Germany and refrain from orgies of revenge.

Today Russian policy is still confronted by this dilemma between the desire for revenge and the need for reconciliation. Stalin’s remark – that Hitlers come and go but the German nation and State remain – have been displayed on placards and banners all over Eastern Germany. Nevertheless the first weeks and months of the Russian occupation were given to an orgy of revenge. […]

Now that the fit of destructive revengefulness seems to be nearly over, the Russian Military Government is getting down to brass tacks and trying to rehabilitate what is left of eastern Germany. The railways do run, after all. Municipal services and public utilities have been restored. Rubble is being cleared from the streets perhaps quicker than in other zones. This is being achieved by a fairly ruthless conscription of womenfolk and old people for the work. The sight of “chains” of old women removing debris may shock the western European visitor. But is it not better to force even the old and the weak to remove the rubble and so to clear the ground for future building rather than leave them waiting for miracles and dying among infested debris? Those industries that have not been or could not be dismantled – the coal and the potash mines, the famous Leuna works, some of the Zeiss factories – are already working, some of them at full pressure. Coal is being imported from what is now Polish Silesia to keep those industries running. Drawing on their own experience, the Russians are teaching the Germans how to make do with

firewood in a coalless winter. They also supply them with the meager food rations from stocks that have been harvested and gathered in by Red Army detachments from fields deserted by Junkers and peasants. The vengeful victor is trying to organize some life in the desert of eastern Germany.

There are definite attractions for the intelligentsia. Artistic life in Berlin and the provinces has been revived primarily through Russian encouragement. Theatres and concert-halls are packed with German audiences. German newspapers in the Russian zone are, in spite of annoyance over censorship, more vivid and better produced than those published in the other zones. They have also some margin of free expression, which is incomparably wider than the margins allowed under the Nazis – it might even arouse envy in a Russian journalist. What has been remarkable in the Russian Military Government so far is perhaps not the extent to which it has transplanted Russian totalitarian methods to Germany, but the extent to which it has refrained from doing so. […]

Source: Isaac Deutscher, “East of the Elbe”, *The Economist*, October 27, 1945, pp. 591–92. © The Economist Newspaper Limited, London (October 27, 1945).

Recommended Citation: Isaac Deutscher, “East of the Elbe” (October 27, 1945), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4456> [September 05, 2026].