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OPINION AND COMMENTARY

The Barbie story: how it could happen

Those who are too young to remember World War II and its early aftermath are rightly baffled by the extraordinary story of Klaus Barbie.

How did it happen that a vicious Nazi secret police officer guilty of sending hundreds, perhaps thousands, of innocent persons to their death in Nazi prison and concentration camps was for 36 years first employed, then protected, and then hidden by US Army officers?

There is no excuse, but there is an explanation that those of us who lived through the period can understand. His story is itself a reminder of what happened in that wrenching moment of history when Germany, which for centuries had shielded Western civilization from Asia, suddenly collapsed and East and West faced each other over the wreckage.

It was a whole new world in which, suddenly, the United States and the Soviet Union saw each other with nothing in between. They were cheek by jowl. They did not know or understand each other. Though they had been allies through the years of war the experience had been difficult for both. It had not been an easy or comfortable or happy association.

Immediately after the war Gen. George S. Patton was the first prominent person among Western wartime leaders to allow himself to say out loud that his country had been fighting on the wrong side. He was profoundly distrustful of the Soviets. During the short time he lived in Munich as allied commander there, he became enamored of the Germans. Others experienced similar thoughts, although they usually kept them to themselves.

That feeling was shared in reverse on the other side.

The Soviets were no happier about having US armed forces in the center of Europe and sitting on top of half of Germany than the West was happy about the Soviets being just across the Elbe sitting on the other half.

Mutual suspicion was rampant in 1947 when US Army Counter-Intelligence hired Barbie to spy on the Soviets, and on German communists.

The fact that he had been a high official in the German Gestapo was a plus, not a minus. He had experience in counterintelligence work against communists and Soviets. He merely transferred his work from one employer to another.

Joseph C. Harsch

He was one of many Germans with experience in anti-Soviet intelligence work who was automatically taken over and put to work by the West. The entire Russian section of German military intelligence, known as the Galen Amt, was taken over intact and went right on working on anti-Soviet intelligence for the Americans.

The Soviets of those days of course accused the Americans, British, French, and others of using Nazis. But the accusation made little difference because the Western allies knew that the Soviets were also using Nazis, regardless of background and record, if it served their purposes. The West was fortunate in one respect. More German government offices and records happened to be in the parts of Germany overrun by Western armies than in the parts overrun by the Soviets.

Hitler's final bunker was in Berlin, but the German High Command had moved to Flensburg on the Baltic. Flensburg was captured by the British, who thereby "bagged" the entire German General Staff with all its records.

More German government records, and people, had been moved to the "national redoubt" in Bavaria where the Americans took over.

Germany in those days was crisscrossed by teams from all the victorious allied countries looking for what they could find of military, industrial, political, or propaganda value. The Americans "bagged" Wernher von Braun, Germany's top expert in rocketry, and from him obtained its postwar lead over the Soviets in missiles. The MX is descended from the rockets Von Braun built for Hitler.

Not all Germans preferred to surrender to the Western allies. The Soviets suspected the US and Britain of wanting to make a "separate" peace with the Germans. But one segment of the Nazi party was strongly left in its ideology and would have preferred to make its peace with the Soviets. Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda, was of that inclination.

The Western allies wanted to know all they could about pro-communist Germans, just as the Soviets wanted all possible information about pro-Western Germans.

The atmosphere in Germany in 1947 was charged with a new sense of rivalry between Soviets and the Western allies, and with the Western fear of both communism and Soviet influence spreading westward. There is often a tendency after wars to see the old enemy as the new ally, and vice versa. It came sooner than usual after World War II. The hiring of Klaus Barbie by the West was a natural, almost inevitable, product of the times.