

Hot off the Press 13!

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Members recommend.....

Oliver Moody Notebook The Times 19.04.21

Pretenders to throne corralled in the kill zone

Some observers of Silicon Valley have a theory about how giant companies such as Facebook and Google maintain near-monopolies.

It's known as the kill zone. Whenever a start-up threatens to seize a chunk of their market share, the larger corporations either buy it up or snuff it out. Eventually investors take fright and the venture capital simply dries up.

This has some bearing on the convulsions in German politics. The centre right is being chewed up by one of its most unpredictable and vicious dogfights in decades. Armin Laschet and Markus Söder, respectively the chief ministers of North Rhine-Westphalia and Bavaria, Germany's largest states, are waging an intricate death match for the nomination to run for chancellor at the general election in September.

There are many reasons why things have become so nasty. Yet I

think an underappreciated one is the political kill zone that Angela Merkel has adeptly created around herself over the past 20 years. One by one, potential rivals have been either co-opted or dispatched to the "graveyard behind the chancellery".

Chapeau, as far as it goes. Yet the ultimate result of this stability has been chaos: there is no longer any obvious successor who has not either been banished into the political wilderness or corralled so squarely under her aegis as to look like a pale shadow of the chancellor.

Watch with Mutti

Merkel used to be a heavy smoker. In the aftermath of German reunification she got through a packet a day before giving up when Helmut Kohl made her his minister for women in 1991. This half-forgotten nugget of gossip surfaced in my memory when a friend in Sweden sent me a "vapourwave" video, featuring some of the Merkel's most soothing speeches set to gentle synth-based muzak and mocked-up footage of her puffing on an e-cigarette during a train journey.

For the uninitiated, vapourwave is a rosy-lit ambient electronic genre

suffused with faintly childish and ironic nostalgia for the Nineties, often mashed up with political messages. Figures with their own sub-genres include Homer Simpson, Donald Trump and Jacob Rees-Mogg.

The Merkelwave YouTube clip has been watched 1.9 million times. I think it expresses something about her that isn't discussed often enough. In many ways she is the last presiding spirit of the 1990s, with its whiggish faith in the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy and the indestructibility of the Pax Americana.

She remains consistently the most popular frontline politician in the country, and many Germans are sorry to see her go. Perhaps a lot of this enthusiasm is powered by a reluctance to let go of the age she represents, a great amniotic sac of a world that once seemed to be rolling inexorably towards a better and safer future. A world that is now passing out of time.

Bottle bank

A lesson in unintended economic consequences: since 2003 Germany has operated a bottle deposit

system called the Flaschenpfand, where you bring your empties back to the shop in return for a small sum in vouchers — €0.08 for a beer bottle, €0.25 for single-use plastic bottles or cans. It's improved the recycling rate by magically turning household detritus into sandwiches.

Yet it's had a notable side effect. During daylight hours in Berlin you often come across the Flaschensammler (bottle-collectors), poking through street bins or lurking next to the glass disposal igloos in the hope of a discarded pilsner.

The system has created a new class of worker, a 21st-century mudlark. You could see this as a success story: a painless way for the better-off to transfer small amounts of money to the homeless. Or you could see it as the degrading gamification of poverty. I'm undecided.

Different strokes

The last time I wrote one of these notebooks I upset some readers by describing Wagner operas as "subsidised Germanic shouting". I'd like to apologise. One should take great care not to belittle niche sub-cultures. I now appreciate that the Wagner cult is every bit as respectable as Merkelwave, spotting manhole covers or writing erotic Harry Potter fan fiction.

Oliver Moody is Berlin correspondent



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News

Father of WWI ace praised his killer

The father of one of Britain's First World War flying aces praised the German airman believed to have killed his son (Will Humphries writes).

In a letter discovered recently Sir Albert Ball wrote to the mother of Lothar von Richthofen, younger brother of the Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen.

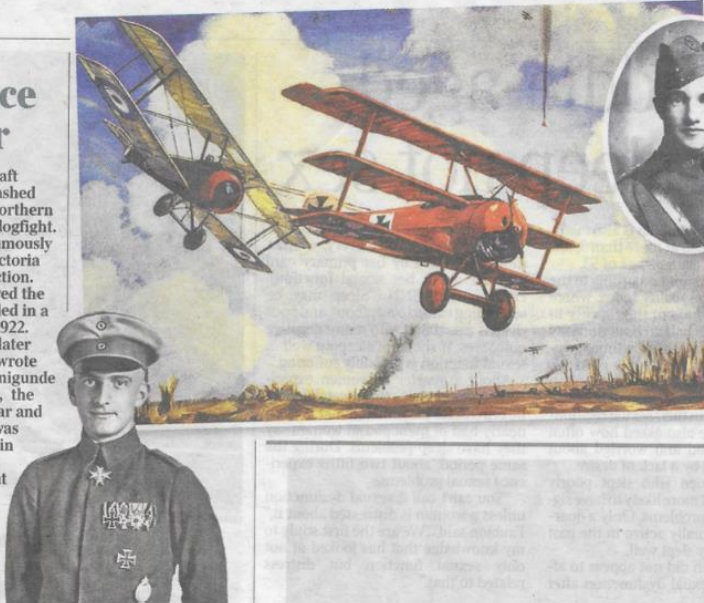
Lothar is credited with shooting down the biplane flown by his son Albert Ball, who at the age of 20 had recorded 44 official victories, but was killed in 1917 when

his Royal Aircraft Factory SE5 crashed into a field in northern France after a dogfight. Ball was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for the action.

Lothar survived the war but was killed in a plane crash in 1922.

Eleven years later Sir Albert Ball wrote to Baroness Kunigunde von Richthofen, the mother of Lothar and Manfred, who was killed in action in 1918.

It appears that the baroness had requested a photo from Sir Albert Ball of his son to include in a



The Red Baron, his brother Lothar, bottom left, and Albert Ball

museum she was creating in her home as a shrine to her sons. Sir Albert, a Nottingham property developer, replied: "I have great pleasure in sending ... my boy's picture, and should be glad if you would return the compliment by sending me one of your brave boy. We both have something to be very proud of in knowing

that our boys did the best they possibly could for their country."

The museum included medals, trophies and other souvenirs but was abandoned during the Second World War and its treasures lost.

Robin Schaefer, a German historian, who found a copy of Ball's letter, believes the most important items were hidden in salt mines. His research is published in *Iron Cross*, a magazine about war from a German perspective.

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World

Hitler's last soldiers reburied near Berlin

Germany

David Crossland Berlin

The remains of 120 German soldiers packed into 92 small coffins, each with a white rose placed on it, have been laid to rest at a ceremony in the Lietzen war cemetery east of Berlin.

They were killed 76 years ago on the western flood plain of the river Oder where the Germans waged a final pitched battle to halt the Red Army's advance on Berlin. Hurriedly buried where they fell, they were discovered and exhumed last year across a 60-mile-wide area. A third of them were identified by their dog tags.

Their reburial, from which descend-

ents were barred because of pandemic restrictions, was the latest ceremony staged by the Volksbund war graves commission, which has made a huge effort since the fall of the Berlin Wall to find German war dead on the battlefields of the Eastern Front.

The numbers are staggering: in Germany alone, 15,000 remains have been exhumed since 1993, mainly in fields and forests east of Berlin where 50,000 German and Soviet soldiers died in less than 70 hours as Hitler's defences outside the capital were breached. Across eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union, which became accessible to Volksbund exhumation teams after international agreements

were struck at the end of the Cold War, the organisation has so far found 964,329 war dead.

The work is far from over: 15 million are still missing in the East. "We would of course like to find all of them but we assume that a third can no longer be retrieved because shopping centres or whatever have been built on them," said Diane Tempel-Bornett, a Volksbund spokeswoman. "This isn't about honouring them, given the National Socialist regime they fought for. This is about giving them a dignified grave and mourning them."

The Volksbund's searches are largely based on wartime German army records of burial sites. The graves tend

to be unmarked because the Germans removed traces of many of them during their retreat, for propaganda reasons. The advancing Red Army did so as well, to eradicate all trace of the invaders whose actions claimed more than 25 million Soviet lives.

Witness accounts still played an important part in identifying individual remains, Tempel-Bornett said. "It is impressive how many alert people there are in their nineties who can remember events clearly and can tell us where soldiers lie," she said. "We got a tip-off about the location of a soldier who had fallen into the hands of partisans. It was clear he had been beaten, you could see his jaw had been smashed with a rifle

butt. We think someone remembered the incident but you can't confirm that, and we wouldn't want to ask questions."

The remains have been reinterred in hundreds of cemeteries that the Volksbund has built or repaired across the former Soviet Union and eastern and southeastern Europe since the 1990s. The organisation opened what it said would be its last new war cemetery on Russian soil, near the town of Dukhovschina, near Smolensk, in 2013. It has been designed to eventually contain up to 70,000 war dead. It said that the search was being impaired, however, by the coronavirus crisis and by strained political relations with Russia.

GERMANY

Berlin's new Ethnological Museum, a collection of non-European art, is negotiating with Nigeria how to return to Africa 500 objects, including 440 bronzes from the kingdom of Benin. The sculptures, created in the 13th Century by the Edo people, were looted by British colonial forces in 1893, during the destruction of the ancient kingdom of Benin in revenge for the murder of several British emissaries by Edo warriors. Around 1,000 objects were taken to Britain and subsequently scattered across European collections. Berlin's decision puts pressure on the British Museum, which houses several hundred Benin bronzes.

Angela Merkel announced a month-long extension to Germany's lockdown as infection-rates surge. "We basically have a new pandemic," Merkel said. Restrictions will now run until at least mid-April.

GERMANY

Hard right German political party Alternative for Germany (AfD) will campaign in September's general election on a trifecta of populist policies; anti-EU, anti-lockdown and anti-immigration. Their slogan, which must sound more impressive in German than it does in English, will be "Germany. But normal". Meanwhile, the race to succeed Angela Merkel as leader of the Christian Democrat/Christian Social Union coalition will be a head to head between the two parties' leaders, the CDU's Armin Laschet and the CSU's Markus Söder. Whoever wins will run for chancellor in September.

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Is Germany poised for a Green revolution?

Germany's federal elections tend to be "polite contests between middle-aged men and, more recently, a middle-aged woman, trotting out worthy but similar centrist policies", said [The Economist](#). "This year, happily, things will be different." Why? Because there is a "genuine chance" that September's poll will "produce Germany's (and almost the world's) first Green head of government". Annalena Baerbock, a former youth trampolining champion with no ministerial experience, was named last week as the Greens' candidate for the chancellorship, having overseen a rise in her party's popularity in three years as co-leader. And voters seem to like what they see: polls are putting the Greens several points ahead of their nearest rivals, Angela Merkel's centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU), who have spent the past eight years in coalition with the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD). For the first time in years, German "voters now face a real choice".

The Greens made a "smart" choice in Baerbock, said Sabine Hamacher in [Frankfurter Rundschau](#). The dynamic, competent 40-year-old is a breath of fresh air. And her party's manifesto is pleasingly radical: it proposes cutting greenhouse emissions by 70% – from the 1990 baseline – by 2030; a wealth tax; and



Baerbock: a breath of fresh air

an 80mph speed limit on autobahns. Actually, those are precisely the kind of plans that could be their undoing, said Wolfram Weimer on [NTV \(Cologne\)](#). The Greens have polled well before the last two elections, only for voters to be "scared away" by the threat of, say, tax hikes or plans for compulsory "veggie days" in cafés. Baerbock has tried to move her party on from its "*Fundi*" (fundamentalist) roots. But keeping the Green left-wing in check during an election campaign will be a tough task.

Luckily for Baerbock, her rivals are doing all they can to help her, said Robert Birnbaum in [Der Tagesspiegel \(Potsdam\)](#). With Merkel stepping down, the CDU could have opted for the charismatic Markus Söder to succeed her as candidate for chancellor. Instead, after a "bitter" struggle, it picked the "boring" Armin Laschet. The SPD, meanwhile, is paying the price for sharing power with the CDU, and has been slipping in the polls. Even so, said Matthew Karnitschnig on [Politico.eu \(Brussels\)](#), I have my doubts about whether conservative Germany is ready "to hand the keys to Europe's largest economy" to a novice. But even if support dips significantly, it will be hard to form the next governing coalition without them. Whatever happens, they now have "the power to shape Germany like never before".