

Radio in the American Sector

By Sam Lichtenstein

The way in which a country deals with its past can often redefine its future. Perhaps the most fascinating case study of a nation that is proactive in the treatment of its troubled history is Germany. From the appalling atrocities committed during the Third Reich to the fierce paranoia that perpetuated the former German Democratic Republic, German re-unification has endured a long, harrowing road towards democracy. Over the past month, my peers and I have gotten the chance to speak to influential people in the realm of German politics, media and education. This opportunity has been an indispensable addition to my academic development as I enter the beginning stages of my career.

One of the most surprising parts of modern Germany is its commitment to public media funding. Each household within its borders must pay a flat rate of 17.50 per month, which sums up to about 8 billion euros dedicated to supporting regional, national and international public broadcasters. To provide some context, America spends about 5 percent of what Germany spends on public media. Our meeting with *Deutsche Welle*, one of Germany's international broadcasters, illuminated the stark differences between American and German journalism. German stories rarely ever use the American standard of the "inverted pyramid" style, an approach rooted in a desperate effort to capture a reader's attention immediately. Instead, German news stories tend to build up to the climax, hoping not to overwhelm the audience too early. Public funding also allows broadcasters to focus more time on stories rather than rely on commercials to fill air time. Watching the seminal *Taggeschau* in sports bars during halftime of every world cup game was a fascinating experience for me.

Some of our most enlightening appointments on our trip were with politicians. I was impressed with the penchant of current and former politicians in Germany for modesty. In America, politicians often catch the public eye with fiery dialogue and radical stances. That does not seem to apply as much in Germany. Walter Momper, the former mayor of Berlin when the wall fell, was outwardly humble when he explained his efforts to integrate East Germans back into Western society. Peter Beyer, Merkel's top man in the foreign ministry, was bothered with President Trump's inflammatory rhetoric surrounding NATO commitments and the Iran Nuclear Deal. Barbara Richstein, a former justice minister and local politician, was candid in her concern with the rise of the AfD party in her constituency. Each politician was articulate in expressing the significance of sustaining a unified Germany and a united Europe in the age of New Nationalism.

The RIAS summer study trip provided me the opportunity to make new discoveries and take them back with me to America. The state of journalism in the new digital world is a complicated topic. By studying other countries' successes and failures in media policy, we can advance our own media landscape in order to inform the public more effectively. However, it is important to understand the differences between the average German and American media consumer. Because of their history, the German people understand that their existence is contingent upon their ability to consume well-researched, hard news. This can be seen in the content of its public media and the lingering popularity of print media in Germany. Both the Nazis and the SPD of East Germany recognized the importance of controlling all aspects of information as a vehicle for maintaining its power. The unified German government has

acknowledged that information is a valuable commodity that cannot be left to private interests.

I left Germany wondering if America should treat journalism in the same way.