

Charité, Season 3: Berlin's famed hospital during the Cold War

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In January, ARD, German public television, aired Season 3 of the series *Charité*, dealing with the history of Berlin's famed hospital during the Cold War and, specifically, at the time of the building of the Berlin Wall in the early 1960s.

The series was scheduled to be broadcast last year to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the reunification of East and West Germany. Filming was held up, however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first season of the series dealt with the institution at the end of the 19th century and Season 2 featured the hospital and its operations under the Nazi regime. The series has attracted millions of viewers across the globe.

Like its predecessors, Season 3 features a gripping, well-researched story line portrayed by a largely compelling array of actors depicting a combination of real and fictional characters.

Historically genuine figures include the German-Jewish paediatrician Ingeborg Rapoport (Nina Kunzendorf) and her Russian-Jewish husband, the renowned biochemist Mitja Rapoport (Anatole Taubman). The latter played a key role in developing the *Charité*'s biochemical institute from 1952 onward. The Jewish pair had been driven out of Germany by the Nazis and were then persecuted as Communists in American exile during the McCarthy era. In the early 1950s, they decided to move to East Germany (German Democratic Republic, GDR), where they did outstanding medical science work at the *Charité*.

Another genuine character is the head of the gynaecological clinic, Prof. Dr Helmut Kraatz (Uwe Ochsenknecht), who worked as a doctor at the *Charité* under the Nazis, but was able to retain his post after the war in East Germany due to his internationally recognised qualifications. The Austrian forensic physician Prof. Dr Otto Prokop (Philipp Hochmair) is also a real figure who, after the war, transferred from Bonn University to the *Charité* in 1956 to become the head of forensic medicine. Following German reunification in 1989-90, his autopsy protocols were used in trials concerning deaths at the Berlin Wall.

The fictional character at the centre of the series is the young doctor Dr Ella Wendt (Nina Gummich), who is transferred from Senftenberg in Brandenburg to the *Charité* in Berlin. She is overjoyed at the change and seizes the opportunity to advance her research into early cancer detection alongside Prokop.

The Wendt character is used to illustrate the dramatic consequences for the hospital, its staff and Berlin's population resulting from the virtual overnight construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. Prior to the Wall, the *Charité* was open to patients from all of Berlin and was renowned for its excellent medical treatment. The clinic buildings in the centre of Berlin were located directly on the territory occupied for the construction of the Wall and all of their windows facing west were bricked over. *Charité* doctors and nurses residing in West Berlin were forced either to move to the GDR or resign.

Historical background

The series, however, leaves out the historical background of the Wall's construction. The fact that Season 3 restricts the *Charité*'s history in the GDR to the period when the Wall was built is problematic. Key aspects of life in the Stalinist-dominated GDR—in particular the Berlin Wall, the East German secret police (the Stasi) and its economic deficiencies—are regularly cited by anti-communists. It would be incorrect, however, to reduce the GDR to such features.

One cannot understand the character of the GDR and the building of the Wall without comprehending the unbridgeable gap between Stalinism and socialism. The GDR was no more socialist than postwar West Germany, dominated politically by former Nazis, was a haven of freedom and democracy.

Stalin's dictatorship in the Soviet Union embodied the rule of a bureaucracy that used state nationalised property relations to advance its own privileges and stood in irreconcilable opposition to the Soviet and international working class. In the Great Terror of 1937-38, the bureaucracy murdered a whole generation of Marxist revolutionaries, and in 1943 Stalin dissolved the Communist International.

The GDR and the other Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe were products of the postwar Yalta and Potsdam treaties, in which Stalin pledged to suppress the socialist aspirations of the international working class with the help of Communist Parties worldwide. In return, Stalinism was given control of a series of buffer states in Eastern Europe to protect the Soviet Union from encirclement by the imperialist powers. Only after the US and its allies intensified their conflict with the Soviet Union in the form of the Cold War did the bureaucracy in Moscow give its approval for the elimination of capitalist property forms in the East European buffer states, including the GDR.

The nationalisations and the introduction of a planned economy formed the basis for a number of social, cultural and scientific advances, the significance of which many people only really understood when they were wiped out following German reunification. Unlike in the Soviet Union, however, such social advances were not the result of a proletarian revolution. When the GDR regime tried to solve the problems created by its economic isolation by attacking the conditions of the working class, the latter reacted by challenging the regime. Contrary to Western (and Stalinist) propaganda, workers did not take to the streets in the GDR on June 17, 1953 to demand the restoration of capitalism. Rather, it was a genuine uprising against the Stalinist regime.

Eight years later, the building of the Wall reflected the profound crisis of the Stalinist bureaucracy. The reactionary sealing of the border between East and West, carried out by the Walter Ulbricht regime, was designed to stem the growing movement of professional workers to the West and stabilise the GDR bureaucracy.

At the same time, the Wall served to divide the working class. Contrary

to the impression given in the series, the West was by no means an economic paradise. Toward the end of the 1950s, mass protests by miners took place in the Ruhr region, which lasted for years and led to the fall of the Erhard government in 1966. Seven years after the Wall was built, the biggest general strike of the postwar period took place in France, precipitating in turn mass class struggles internationally, including in Eastern Europe.

The GDR bureaucracy feared such struggles as much as the capitalists in the West. In private, both the West German government and its allies approved of the Wall and had their own interest in a stable GDR. At a meeting between Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and US President Kennedy in June 1961, the latter gave his approval to the “measures” taken by the GDR to prevent the flight of citizens from East to West. At the same time, of course, the Western powers and the West German government were quite prepared to use the building of the Wall to propagate anti-communism.

None of this background is even hinted at in the *Charité* series. Although the filmmakers strive to portray the characters and their motives with a certain degree of complexity, their dialogue—during such an intensely political period—remains conspicuously apolitical. The series ends up adapting to the falsification equating Stalinism with socialism.

GDR advances in medicine

One has to give the filmmakers credit, however, for dealing with the medical advances made in the GDR. East Germany was largely cut off from access to some important international technical developments (for example, Charité had only one antiquated iron-lung machine) and medical staff continually confronted the obstructive behaviour of the state Stalinist bureaucracy, represented by the repeated appearances in the corridors of the clinic of the apparatchik Lehmann (Nicholas Reinke). Nevertheless, following the abolition of capitalist property forms, the East German health system was no longer subject to the profit motives, which dominated the pharmaceutical industry in the West.

In the GDR, for example, there was a compulsory polio vaccination program for newborn babies based on a drug developed in the Soviet Union. Infant mortality rates were extremely high in both parts of Germany after the war, but were reduced earlier in the GDR than in West Germany, which had no comparable program. Doctors from different medical disciplines worked closely together in polyclinics. There was even the possibility of gender reassignment for transsexuals at an earlier period in the East than in West Germany, as the film demonstrates with one case at Prof. Kraatz’s institute.

Above all, the third season movingly depicts the commitment and humanity of Charité’s staff, who did everything in their power to care for patients, in the face of considerable political adversity. The gruff but kind-hearted head nurse Gerda (Hildegard Schroedter) is exemplary in this respect. Those who flee to West Berlin, after the construction of the Berlin Wall, are viewed as individuals only concerned with their own welfare and careers.

Particularly noteworthy is the role of the paediatrician Rapoport: she fights for a holistic treatment for pregnant women and newborns against resistance from Professor Kraatz. Kraatz does not hide his resentment toward Rapoport, whose dissertation was not approved by the Nazis in 1937 because of her Jewish mother.

Rapoport stresses to Kraatz the necessity of merging the two parts of the clinic, which were only connected by long pathways after the construction of the Wall. One scene in the series features a dramatic rescue operation of a premature baby with jaundice.

In an interesting conversation with the baby’s mother, who wants to move as quickly as possible to West Berlin to join her husband, Rapoport explains why she moved from American exile to the GDR: “I never really wanted to go back to Germany,” but her husband had convinced her East Germany was a different state from the country that murdered six million Jews. To the objection that this new state was “not fully developed,” she says: “That may be, but I like the approach, the idea of togetherness, of being there for one other ...”

In fact, Rapoport eventually achieved a breakthrough and the merger of the two hospital departments. In 1969, she was awarded the first chair of neonatology in the whole of Europe. In 2015, after a period of almost 80 years, the University of Hamburg retroactively recognised her dissertation, which Rapoport, born in 1912, personally defended in front of a panel of three professors. She died at the age of 104 and retained her socialist convictions until the end.

Dr Wendt also decides to stay at the Charité. At a cancer congress in West Berlin, she stands in for Dr Prokop and enthusiastically presents her research results. She is immediately wooed by West Berlin chief physicians who try to recruit her and, during a break, a Berlin clinic director makes the young researcher a tempting offer to work in a clinic sponsored by the pharmaceutical company Bayer—naturally with a correspondingly higher salary than at the Charité.

The fact that the series’ third season coincides with the deadly intensification of the coronavirus crisis has a surprising, perhaps unintended effect. Viewers must unavoidably recall the desperate situation in hospitals today when Dr Wendt is suddenly faced with a triage decision. A farmer with an advanced lung condition needs penicillin as does the popular hospital caretaker Fritz, who has contracted blood poisoning. Due to a supply shortage, however, there is only one dose available. “You don’t want to let our Fritz die, do you?” asks head nurse Gerda with a horrified look.

Back in the GDR, shortage was the reason for the lack of medicine. Today, intensive care beds, testing capacities and vaccines are lacking because of a deliberate policy of putting the profits of banks and corporations before the lives and health of the population.

Thirty years ago, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the GDR were celebrated as the “end of socialism” and a “victory for capitalism.” At that time, the current horrific toll of coronavirus deaths was unimaginable. Television audiences will draw their own conclusions. On October 3, 2020, on the anniversary of German reunification, the WSWs wrote: “The Wall separated two great lies. In the East, the Stalinist bureaucrats claimed to have built socialism, and in the West, the capitalist rulers who were in personnel continuity with the Nazis, celebrated themselves as liberal and democratic.”

A genuine socialist society, allowing economic, scientific and medical cooperation in the interest of all humanity, requires the collaboration of workers around the globe and the worldwide elimination of the profit system. The coronavirus disaster places this task urgently on the agenda.



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