

Europe's disappearing ghosts

DÜSSELDORF. With 18 museums and 260 pubs for 575,000 inhabitants, this flashy, energetic capital of North Rhine Westphalia is a congenial place to brood on Europe and its fading spectres.

Germany's ugliest ghost is Hitler, his war fed by coal and steel from near this ancient town. As Gerhard Schroeder retires tomorrow as Berlin's first raised-after-the-war chancellor, German guilt for Nazi crimes is fading. Schoolbooks, monuments and awkward conversations with grandparents or foreigners still cast shadows. But people now talk easily of Hitler as a distant historical figure -- like Caligula or Tamerlane.

Last year, German film-maker Oliver Hirschbiegel broke the taboo in his riveting movie *The Downfall*. It dares to show Hitler in the crazy, chaotic days of his *Götterdämmerung* – the twilight of the self-appointed Nazi gods -- as a full-faceted human being. Swiss actor Bruno Ganz, left hand trembling behind his back, eyes darting from madness to tenderness for a child or dog, is no cardboard grotesque. He forces audiences to leap-frog horror -- to ask how a sophisticated nation could have deified such a mediocre man.

The massive Documentation Centre in Nuremberg's Nazi Party Rally Grounds does the same – but it almost crushes pity through weight of evidence. Ganz and his fellow actors plunge you into the heart of darkness: Magda Goebbels poisoning her six children; Hitler's bubbly young secretary Traudl seeing no evil; architect-armaments minister Albert Speer playing to Hitler's artistic vanity. All this demystifies Hitler and his coterie. They no longer evoke Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, but the dumb luck of a few psychopaths.

Another dimming ghost is Europe's youth revolt of May 1968. In France, trigger and centre of protest, self-dramatizing intellectuals tarted up this hormonal climax with half-baked, class-envying Marxism. They added *de rigueur* 1789 storm-the-Bastille nonsense, mount-the-barricades 1870 *Commune* posturing, and tingly adaptations of Diderot's: "Let's strangle the last king with the guts of the last priest."

Some of this fuzzy ideology seeped across the Rhine, degenerating in 1970 into the Baader-Meinhof gang's bloodthirsty, urban-guerrilla Red Army Faction. A less virulent revolt followed a French-German student-anarchist called Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Today, Dany le Rouge, as his red hair got him tagged, is Dany le Vert – a lovable, Green Party populist.

Another becalmed 1968er is Joschka Fischer, the just-retired Green Party German foreign minister. Fischer grew from street thug (filmed mercilessly beating a policeman) into a revered middle-of-the-road statesman. He calls himself the "last live rock-and-roller of German politics," others now reduced to lip-syncing slogans.

Superannuated 1968 hell-raisers fill the ranks of European establishments -- and antechambers of old folks' homes. After the just-ended 2005 German elections, the 2007 French presidential election, and Tony Blair's half-announced Frank Sinatra-style last farewell tour, 1968 will truly be over, guitars and all.

What about this month's car-burning craziness in France's *banlieues*? The May 1968 blow-up was a different beast. It was ideological -- an anti-establishment, anti-capitalist crusade. Today's violence is an intercultural, ex-colonial spasm – a *cri du coeur* of

mainly second-generation ‘foreign’ youth aching to *join*, not reject, France’s society and establishment.

A third ghost leaving the scene is the 1950s dream of a federal Europe. A tragedy or just a swing of the pendulum? When “Europe” was only six countries (France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg), Robert Schuman’s and Jean Monnet’s vision rallied statesmen to European unity as a rampart against war. As the Cold War deepened in the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s, and other countries joined, “Europe,” backed by U.S. military might, stood for defence against Moscow. Soon it meant economic and political integration.

Now suddenly last May, French and Dutch voters dismissed a European Union “constitutional treaty” aiming to reorganize an unwieldy Europe of 25 members. Europe’s grand orientation fractured. Schroeder’s Germany and Jacques Chirac’s France sought a Europe apart from, and standing up to, the U.S. Most other members wanted a strong Europe in trusting alliance with the U.S.

The split parallels that on America’s Iraq war. And different views about economic growth – rigid labour laws and high taxes (France and Germany) vs. business-friendly labour and tax laws (most other countries). New German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Left-Right Grand Coalition may help finesse differences.

Düsseldorf’s ghosts would agree that the first purpose of a united Europe was indeed to make war impossible: on the night of July 11-12, 1943, 783 Allied bombers, including Canadian Lancasters, flattened the city, killing thousands.

Want to get really ghostly? Go to Düsseldorf’s suburban Mettmann to visit the Neanderthal Museum. Or hop over to nearby Aachen, where Charlemagne still dreams of a united Europe. But a handier ghost, with a word to pardon all the above for their crimes and illusions, is Düsseldorf’s most famous son, poet Heinrich Heine: “God will forgive me -- that’s his trade!”