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## TAPON, Francis

### Eastern Germany – Nearly 25 Years after the Wall

#### When rats experimented on humans

Although humans like to experiment with rats, there was a time when rats experimented with humans. The rats took a bunch of humans who spoke the same language, shared the same history, and looked the same (at least to a rat's eyes). The rats split these nearly identical humans in two groups. The rats were only interested in measuring the impact of one key variable, so they left one group of humans alone as their control group. The rats, however, injected the second group with something called *communism*. Once the effects set in, the rats left the lab, turned out the lights, and would not return for over 40 years.

The results of the rat experiment were remarkable. After just one human generation, the two groups of humans hardly recognized each other. The first group had not changed: they were still competitive, creative, and hard-working. The communism-infected group, however, was nearly the opposite. In that group, state-owned enterprises earned 97 percent of the total net national income. The few non-state businesses were taxed up to 90 percent. The state bore 80 percent of the costs of basic supplies, from bread to housing. The state was everything.

All this altered people's behavior. They got married early because it took less time to get a state apartment if you were married. They also tended to have children at a young age because the state guaranteed childcare and employment. Their lives were steady and predictable, which was comforting, but communism also sapped their motivation and drive. There were often shortages. For instance, they had to wait 13 years to get a Wartburg, a crappy commie car. The industrious, innovative spirit diminished. Paranoia grew. Moreover, the most promising, talented humans usually escaped out of the communist rat labyrinth. The rat scientists spent years studying the data. In the end, they summarized their findings in their lab book. On the last page, they scribbled their conclusion: "Communism sucks."

Women often forget the pain of childbirth and only remember the joy; similarly, today some people reminisce about the "good old communist days." Throughout Eastern Europe, people shared with me their nostalgia for that period. Kasper, a Pole, summed it up well, "About a third of Poland thinks that we're worse off than we were under communism. They say life was better back then, because we didn't have to think about how to pay for our bills. We were all the same. Today, the difference between the rich and poor has grown. Also, under communism, you had no choice, but you had money. Today, you have choice, but you have no money."

Whenever I heard such romanticizing of the past, I always asked, "If it was so great, then why doesn't your country go back? Who's stopping you? Go ahead. Would you like to go back to those days?"

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As if I gave them an electric shock, they would wake up and say, "Oh no! I prefer it now. Most people do. Maybe only some of the senior citizens would be willing to go back." However, I found it hard to even find old people who were willing to go back. The few people who would want to go back are those who are lazy (because they like not having to work hard to have their basic needs covered), those who are extremely risk averse (because they like the stability and predictability of communism), or those who value economic equality above all else (because they are willing to sacrifice nearly anything just so that everyone ends up economically equal). Such people are a minority on this planet, which explains why communism has few fans.

In Europe, the rat scientists may have ended their experiment of taking twin regions and separating them at birth, but they have one other similar experiment still going on today. It's been running now for nearly 70 years. In this experiment, the nearly identical people weren't split east-west, but rather north-south. The place is called Korea. Although the results are not yet in, it's probable that the rat scientists will reach the same conclusion.

Although these experiments on twin human societies are the most powerful evidence against communism, there are plenty of other examples. Communism has been tried in big countries (Russia and China), small ones (North Korea and Cambodia), cold countries (Mongolia), warm ones (Cuba), Caucasian countries (Ukraine), Asian ones (Vietnam), Hispanic ones (Nicaragua), and Black ones (Angola). Prior to China's move toward capitalism, there was a vast disparity of living conditions between Hong Kong and Chinese cities just a few kilometers away (another fascinating twin experiment). The communist countries that still survive today are hanging by a thread, forced to adopt a quasi market-based economy. As we've seen, Belarus is a Soviet time capsule that continues only because Russia is keeping it on life support.

No matter where humans have tried communism, the results have been lousy. Neighboring capitalist countries always enjoy a higher standard of living. If you disagree, then ask yourself why capitalist citizens are not sneaking into communist countries. Why are the walls and barbed wire designed to keep the communist people trapped in as prisoners, and not to keep the neighboring people from moving into their utopia? If life there is so great, why do they have to force people to stay? When capitalist countries build walls (like America's silly wall on the Mexican border), it's not to keep people from rushing *out*, but rather to keep them from rushing *in*. In conclusion, people vote with their feet.

Today, it's not fashionable to celebrate the benefits of capitalism. Humans enjoy complaining, so capitalism is an easy target, especially since nowadays nearly every country practices it to some degree. As a result, the grass-is-greener-on-the-other-side syndrome takes over, nostalgia distorts our memories, and it's easy to forget Eastern Europe's most profound lesson. Indeed, the downside of free markets winning so decisively over controlled ones is that today we have almost no more failing experiments to point out to young people. The shocking results of a poll showed that only half of German 18-year-olds agreed that the GDR was a dictatorship and 66 percent didn't know who built the Berlin Wall. Let's not forget the time when the rats experimented with humans.

Lastly, there's absolutely no doubt that capitalism is often brutal, inhumane, and cruel. In fact, it's even fair to say that it also sucks. However, compared to heavy government control, it sucks less.

### Dresden's other lesson

When I was in Berlin in 2005, I told three different groups of young locals that I wanted to visit Dresden. The conversation usually went like this:

"Oh my god!" they would say, "Why would you want to go there? That's, like, *East Germany*."

Each time I would resist the urge to pull out a map to show them that Berlin was also in East Germany. Instead, I would ask, "But have you been to Dresden?"

They shook their heads. It was surprising how little Berliners knew about East Germany. It's as if the Wall were still up.

Thanks to Pink Floyd, I knew more about Dresden than some Berliners. In my all-time favorite album, *The Final Cut*, the song "The Hero's Return" has these lyrics: "And even now part of me flies / Over Dresden at Angels One-Five / Though they'll never fathom it, behind my / Sarcasm desperate memories lie." I was 13 years old when this song came out. Being an obsessive teenager, I wanted to understand every lyric. "Angels One-Five" is aviator-speak, referring to an altitude of 15,000 feet (4,573 meters). Now what were these "desperate memories"?

The answer lies near the end of WWII, when Dresden was the only major German city that was still mostly undamaged. It was an important transportation hub with military facilities in its outskirts, which the Allies used as an excuse to bomb Dresden into oblivion. If you lived in Dresden in 1945, your Valentine's Day was full of hate, not love. Hate rained from the sky as 1,300 low-flying heavy bombers dropped 3,900 tons of bombs onto Dresden. The Allies first dropped the bombs to break water mains and create air pockets, then dropped 650,000 incendiary bombs, which created a massive firestorm. People were swept off their feet and sucked into a raging firestorm that was hungry for oxygen. "Desperate memories" haunted some pilots who believed, along with many impartial observers, that the bombing of Dresden was so unethical that it was a war crime. Although the Allies destroyed 90 percent of Dresden's city center, many military facilities were largely untouched. Most of the 25,000 people who died were civilians. The bombing of Dresden remains one of the most controversial Allied military actions in WWII.

In 1985, Dresden's symbol, the *Frauenkirche* ("Church of Our Lady") was still in ruins. That year, Vladimir Putin, Russia's future President, was beginning a six-year assignment in Dresden for his employer, the KGB. After the communists left, the Germans continued rebuilding Dresden. They restored the stunning *Semperoper* (the Saxony state opera house) and the Zwinger Palace. I was fortunate to visit the *Frauenkirche* at its grand reopening in 2005. In 2006, Dresden celebrated its 800-year anniversary. Today, it's one of the most beautiful cities in Europe.

There's a profound, often overlooked, lesson in Dresden. The moral that most people draw from Dresden is that the Allies were also cruel during WWII. However, Dresden's other lesson, indeed, the lesson of all of post-war Germany, is what a remarkable people the Germans are. Imagine that in 1945 you could have one of these five territories that were untouched by WWII: Montana, Spain, Argentina, Saudi Arabia, or Congo. Or you could pick Germany. What kind of fool would have picked Germany in 1945? Its resources were depleted or confiscated. Its cities and infrastructure were ash and rubble. Its people were demoralized and broken. Meanwhile, the other five territorial options had plenty of resources,

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decent infrastructure, and upbeat people. Germany had nothing. Only an idiot would bet on Germany over those other options. And yet, that idiot would be a genius. In less than 40 years, Germany (the size of Montana) would rise from the ashes and not only blow past all those other territories, but would also become one of the five most powerful economies in the world. In 2009, Germany was the largest exporter in the world! They exported over \$1 trillion of stuff to the world, which was more than China or America, countries that are vastly larger than Germany. In 2010, China finally became the world's top exporter, but Germany still exported more than the USA.

We Americans like to pat ourselves on the back by saying that Germany bounced back thanks to our Marshall Plan. We flatter ourselves. The Marshall Plan is overrated. It cost \$13 billion over four years. Thanks to inflation, one dollar was worth about 10 times more in 1948 than 2011. Therefore, \$13 billion in 1948 equals about \$130 billion in 2011. Although that's a decent amount of money, we forget that it was spread out over 17 countries. Italy received roughly the same aid as Germany, France got 58 percent more, and the UK got well over twice as much assistance. Of the \$13 billion, Germany received less than \$1.5 billion—that's only \$15 billion in today's dollars. Nowadays America routinely gives \$15 billion to any country with a bank account. In fact, after German unification, West Germany was giving East Germany \$100 billion in aid *annually*, making the Marshall Plan seem like peanuts.

We also forget that instead of helping West Germany immediately after WWII, the Allies kicked Germany while it was down, trying to send it back to Bronze Age. The Allies initially wanted to turn Germany in a pastoral, agricultural state. After WWII, the Allies destroyed 1,500 German manufacturing plants so that Germany's heavy industry would drop to half of its 1938 levels. In 1946, the Allies capped German steel production to 25 percent of the prewar production level and dismantled the "redundant" plants. German car production could not exceed 10 percent of its 1938 level. Germany, the Allies believed, should be reduced to a standard of living equal to 1932—at the low point of the Great Depression. As a result, after WWII, many Germans were without money to heat their house or to eat, froze and starved to death.

East Germany had an even steeper hill to climb: it got the anti-Marshall Plan. It had to give its best agricultural lands and best port to Poland, and was encumbered with \$10 billion in debt to the USSR; that's practically the value of the entire Marshall Plan! That's like saddling Maine (which is a similar size as the GDR) with \$100 billion in debt today. It's as if the Soviets had said to East Germany, "Instead of *getting* a Marshall Plan from us, you're going to *give* us a Marshall Plan. Oh, and please do that with just the ash that you have. Don't worry, our brilliant communist economic system will help out. Thanks."

The pugnacious East Germans said, "OK, if these are the cards we're dealt, let's make the most of it." Within 40 years, East Germany had a higher standard of living than all the communist countries in the world. Appropriately, the GDR's anthem was "*Auferstanden aus Ruinen*" ("Risen from Ruins"). It's as if there had been a marathon and East Germany was told to start one hour after everyone else and was forced to run it with its hands tied behind its back. Despite those handicaps, East Germany still managed to come from behind and win the race.

Some might say, "Yeah, but Germany has a great position being in the center of Europe." OK, let's imagine if Germany and Russia had to swap territories. Is there any doubt that Germans would transform the Russian land and make it by far the most powerful country in the world? Russian writer, Fyodor

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Dostoyevsky, didn't mention the Germans, but he should have when he wrote, "If only Englishmen or Americans lived in Russia instead of us! . . . Oh, they would have opened up everything: the metal ores and minerals, the countless deposits of coal."<sup>1</sup>

Imagine shipping everyone from Congo (which is the size of Western Europe and has plenty of resources) and moving them to Germany while making the Germans move into Congo. How would the Germans utilize Congo's rich land? In a few years, Germans would be pumping out more cars than ever, harvesting the sun's energy with solar panels, and curing cancer thanks to some exotic plant they find in Congo's forests. Imagine if they had Argentina, or Saudi Arabia, or Spain. Those countries would be top five global economies. And what if Germans took over Canada? Or the USA? They would work the land and within decades build the mightiest nation the world has ever seen. Transplant any other people onto German lands and they could not equal the output of the Germans.

Some continue to insist, "C'mon, you can't make such arguments. Germany is the way it is because of its geography. If you moved Germans to another continent, they wouldn't be the same people." True, geography molds people, but it is only one factor; otherwise, France, Germany, and Poland would all be nearly identical (since they have similar geographies). However, even though Germany was light-years behind France in 1946, it managed to outperform France in just a few decades. In 1948, the USSR thanked Poland for rejecting the Marshall Plan by giving it nearly half a billion dollars, valuable factories, a lucrative five-year trade agreement, and 200,000 tons of grain. Despite Poland's huge head start, tiny East Germany passed them too. The point is that Germans were able to make something out of nothing. In fact, they had less than nothing when you consider their debt burdens and all the anti-German feelings after WWII. All Germans really had after WWII were their hands and brains.

The Germans can do this because they have their shit together. They make the rest of us look like bumbling buffoons. Of course, saying such things is terribly taboo, because (gasp!) you might be a Neo-Nazi fascist! Can we be a bit more mature in the twenty-first century, please? Let's give credit where credit is due and stop censoring people who applaud and admire Germans. Nobody would argue with you if you observed that 4,000 years ago the Egyptians were light-years ahead of everyone else. If you transplanted the Pharaohs and their people to some other part of the world, they would also be capable of making the most out of the situation because their culture was disciplined, organized, and hard-working. Italians like to think they're descendants of the Romans, but if you consider the extreme organization and industriousness of the Romans, you'd conclude that they had more in common with today's Germans than today's Italians. Imagine challenging today's Italians and Germans to rebuild Rome's Colosseum from scratch. How long would each take? The Germans would be cutting the ribbon while the Italians would still be in the pizzeria negotiating the design with the mafia.

Countries (and people) are full of excuses as to why they're so retarded. They'll blame colonialism, a communist hangover, a heavy debt burden, a lack of resources, a poor geographic location, a tough history, or a crappy childhood. We could all learn from Germany's attitude: they take whatever conditions they are dealt and make the most out of them. Of course, Germans whine and complain just like anyone, but immediately afterward, they roll up their sleeves and get to work. Other societies roll back into bed and feel sorry for themselves. Moreover, although Germans can be ridiculously stubborn,

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<sup>1</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, Volume 2, page 1049.

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they also know when to be flexible. That balance is one of the secrets to their success. Germans, who usually look down on East Germans and are a bit sexist, showed their flexibility in 2005 when they elected Angela Merkel, an East German woman, as their leader.

*It is nonsense to say that Germans are unable to change. — Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, raised in East Germany*

When Veit left me at the Polish train station in Subice, I asked him what he thought Germans do best. He said, "Germans are gut at managing money and their economy." I smiled. That's the understatement of the century.

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Francis Tapon's mother is from Chile and his father is from France. They met in San Francisco thanks to a slow elevator. His brother, Philippe Tapon, is the author of two novels. His family spoke Spanish at home, unless an English swear word was necessary.

Francis was born in San Francisco, California where he attended the French American International School for 12 years. Native French teachers convinced him that France is the coolest country in the universe. He is fluent in English, French, and Spanish. He struggles with Italian, Portuguese, Slovenian, and Russian. If you point a gun to his head, he'll start speaking other languages too.

He earned a Religion Degree with honors from Amherst College. He also has an MBA from Harvard Business School. After Harvard, he co-founded a robotic vision company in Silicon Valley. Then he decided to change his life forever.

In 2001, he sold the little he had to hike the 3,000 km Appalachian Trail. Then, after consulting for Hitachi, he visited all 25 countries in Eastern Europe in 2004. He consulted at Microsoft before hiking the 4,200 km Pacific Crest Trail in 2006. In 2007, he became the first person to do a round-trip on the Continental Divide Trail—a seven-month journey spanning 9,000 km. In 2008-2011, he visited over 40 European countries, but focused on revisiting all the Eastern European ones. In 2009, he climbed up Mont Blanc and walked across Spain twice (once by traversing the Pyrenees from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, and then by hiking El Camino Santiago). He's backpacked over 20,000 kilometers (12,500 miles) and traveled to over 80 countries.

He is the author of *Hike Your Own Hike: 7 Life Lessons from Backpacking Across America*. This book can be also ordered at: <http://francistapon.com/shop>. He is donating half of his book royalty to America's three major scenic trails.

***The Hidden Europe: What Eastern Europeans Can Teach Us* is his second book of his WanderLearn Series, was published as ebook on December 12, 2011, and as hardcover on March 4, 2012.**

In 2012-2015, he plans to visit every country in Africa and write a book about that in 2016. His goal is to wander to all 193 countries of the world, see what we can learn from them, and share it with everyone.

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