

# Germany Since 1945: Avatar Assignment

Semester-Long Writing Assignment

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## DESIGNED FOR: Germany Since 1945

**Course Type:** Lecture/discussion, no pre-requisites, ten-week quarter

**Course Enrollment/Size:** 30-45

**Student Composition:** Draws from all majors/minors

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## ASSIGNMENT BACKGROUND, GOALS, AND DESIGN:

This is the main assignment I use in my “Germany since 1945” class, which has no pre-requisites and which is taught on a quarter system—I usually see the students a total of 18 times in the term.

I should give credit where credit is due: my version borrows significant language from a similar assignment by Steven S. Volk which he describes in an article for the *History Teacher* (<http://www.societyforhistoryeducation.org/pdfs/Volk.pdf>).

In my experience, students find this assignment engaging. It improves discussions, as I can always ask “And what would your character have thought about this reading?” The aspect of de-personalization can be helpful for having more engaged discussions about issues like class mobility, religious identity, and racial discrimination. It also makes me not dread grading (important!) because they do wonderfully interesting things with their characters.

It allows students to engage their own interests: I have had students use the assignment to learn about queer history, students who find historically plausible ways for their characters to travel to Korea and to compare life in divided societies, and even students who love sports, whose characters become minor members of historic *Bundesliga* teams.

I suggest giving students some freedom to pick the original avatars. I have not personally had any problems with students using their avatars to spout noxious attitudes yet, but I would suggest considering this issue and how you will respond should it happen *before* you adopt the assignment.

Although I have not used this assignment in an all-online class yet, it could work well: I use Canvas to create groups of students and then they read and comment on the posts of a consistent small group throughout the quarter. I expect that other LMS should have a similar function.

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## THE ACTUAL ASSIGNMENT:

### Avatars for Classroom Assignment: Germany Since 1945

You will soon draw a slip of paper from a hat. You will find a few details about a person (your “avatar”) whose life you will live (imaginatively) and narrate over approximately 60 years. Specifically, you will find your avatar’s birth year, birth place, and some information about the occupations of your avatars’ parents and their religious and political affiliations. Your gender, your sexual orientation, and any number of other choices are up to you.

Over the course of the quarter, you will narrate your avatar’s experiences from the 1940s until today. You are free to create these lives as you wish, keeping in mind some guidelines:

1. You cannot die or become totally incapacitated before 2000.
2. You may move within the two German states, but you cannot leave the country permanently. If you choose to go abroad for a period, you must remain engaged with events in Germany.
3. You cannot fundamentally change the course of history. You are encouraged, indeed expected, to engage with important events in history: you could become an Olympic athlete, you could spy on your neighbors for the Stasi, you could shelter an RAF member for a night, and you could be present at the fall of the Berlin Wall. You just cannot win any gold medals or sabotage any political leaders.
4. Recall that as your avatar, you don’t know what will happen next: for example, we are studying this period as people who know that the division of Germany will last for roughly forty years, but your avatars will not know about the future.

You will write roughly biweekly entries of **at least 750 words** on a course blog in the voice of your avatar. I will ask you to respond both to very specific events: “How does your character feel about the building of the Berlin Wall?” and to broader time periods: “Write about any event that influenced your character in the 1980s.”

These should be written at the time (i.e. you are not writing a memoir in 2018 looking back on your life) and might be written as letters to a friend (perhaps a pen pal elsewhere in the class?) as diary entries, or as another form of ego-writing. You may also add images (i.e., a photograph of “your” home or “your” family) or links to video material.

You are required to write brief comments to your own posts in your own voice, explaining and justifying the choices you made. This should include your own confusion and any open questions you may have (“I thought that my character would have supported the Communist party based on something I read on page 5, but something Professor Stokes said in class made me question that assumption... what do other people think?”)

These comments **must** cite specific information from lectures, readings, and any research that you want to do outside of class (use of Wikipedia is OK for these assignments).

Your generation has sometimes been described as blessed by “the grace of a late birth”: none of you were quite old enough to have had to make difficult moral choices during the period of Nazi rule.

All of you do have parents who did live through the National Socialist period, and your relationship with your parents and their past will be a factor in your lives.

Your avatar may differ from you in every possible way, or they may share similar religious beliefs, a similar sexual orientation, or a similar family constellation. No matter what you have in common with your avatar, they were born in Germany between 1940 and 1950 and you were (I assume) not. As you develop your avatar, the point is not to write the life that is most like the one you would ideally live, but to write a life that would have been historically consistent with the period that we are studying. You might decide to break with the patterns of your parents, and unexpected things may happen in your life: but these choices and events must be justified in the context of the larger history.

*One thing this means:* East and West Germany did *not* see the same patterns of class advancement in the second half of the twentieth century as were common in the United States. As we will discover, avatars in West Germany will usually, but not always, remain in their class position, while many, but not all, of the avatars who live in East Germany will find their class position turned upside-down from that of their parents.

The gender you choose also matters, in ways that you can probably expect—we will discuss women in the family and workplace as well as the women’s movement in each country—but also in one way that you might forget: men were subject to mandatory military conscription in West Germany from 1956-2011 and in East Germany from 1963-1989.

Remember that your avatar will age as the course progresses. This may include getting married and/or partnered (to somebody who you would realistically have met in your life) and/or having children (who can have their own stories).

You will want to think about the way that such “everyday” events would have been shaped by the larger historical forces in our lectures and readings. Think about the kinds of e-mails and diaries you write today: you may not know the precise percentage of people in your own community who voted for Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, but you definitely know what the *trend* in your community was, and you know about the ways that the election strained and/or strengthened your relationships with the people you know.

### **Comments and Avatar Groups:**

I will write short comments on all of your entries. The point of my comment will not be to argue with your avatar’s perspective, but to pose questions or approaches that might be useful. If the post contains historical inaccuracies, I will correct them.

Because it is important that you also read some other entries, but it will be too much work for you to read all of them each week, you will be divided into groups of 6, with 3 each from East and West Germany. You are expected to read the blog posts of your colleagues in your group and to post comments to their entries.

## Grading:

I will grade your entries with grades from 0-4 to take account of the quality of your post. You will be the only one to see your grades: they will not be shared with the class.

I will give you “0” for a missed post; “1” for a post that was late, half-hearted, majorly historically inaccurate (of the “World War Two happened in the 1920s” scale), or contained zero details from lecture and readings; “2” for a post which contained some details or did not really develop the historical narrative or the avatar; “3” for a post that was mostly consistent with the history, provided specific details from lecture and readings, and developed the avatar’s character; and “4” for a post which engaged deeply with the history and had above-average narrative and character development.

The extra 5 points can be earned by consistently engaging with your colleagues’ entries and commenting on them within a week after they are posted.

1. You were born in 1935. Your father, a shopkeeper, was a committed supporter of the Nazi party from 1926 forward. Your mother was a local leader of the Nazi women’s auxiliary. Both are Protestants. You live in Leipzig (East Germany).
2. You were born in 1935. Your father, a tailor, was a committed supporter of the Nazi party from 1926 forward. Your mother was a local leader of the Nazi women’s auxiliary. Both are Catholics. You live in Munich (West Germany).
3. You were born in 1938. Your father became a judge during the Weimar Republic. He joined the Nazi party in 1934. Your mother came from a family of East Prussian landowners whose male members also joined the party in the mid- to late-1930s. Both parents are Protestants (East Germany).
4. You were born in 1938. Your father was a career civil servant who joined the Nazi party in 1934. Your mother, who came from a Catholic family of the Bavarian gentry, opposed but did not protest his decision. You live in Munich (West Germany).
5. You were born in 1946. Your father is a Lutheran pastor in an agricultural village in Saxony. Your mother is also highly involved in the church, its community activities, and the upkeep of its buildings and parsonage (East Germany).
6. You were born in 1947. Your mother was a young woman during the Nazi regime, part of the League of German Girls. Your father is an African-American GI in the American zone whose commanding officer denied him permission to marry your mother. Your mother remains unmarried after your father returns to the U.S. and works as an office manager at a bank near Hamburg (West Germany).
7. You were born in 1945. Your parents are both Communist Party members. Your father survived a brief term of imprisonment in the Oranienburg concentration camp in 1933. When he was released, your parents went to Moscow, where your father briefly spent time at

the Hotel Lux. They have returned to East Berlin in order to help build the East German state (East Germany).

8. You were born in 1938. Your father was a Wehrmacht soldier who fought on the Eastern front. Your mother worked in a munitions factory. Your father is captured by the Soviet forces and becomes a prisoner of war; he will not be released until 1956. Your family is Catholic and lives in Cologne (West Germany).
9. You were born in 1940. Your family are large landowners and your father was a Wehrmacht officer in Africa during the war. Your mother managed the family's farms until his return in 1945. The family's sizeable lands are in Thuringia, on what will become the Eastern side of the border (East Germany).
10. You were born in 1935. Your parents, Polish-speaking Catholics, came from Eastern Prussia to the Ruhr area in the 1920s to work in the coal mines. They became active in the mineworkers' union and actively supported the SPD. As skilled mineworkers, your father and mother remained at work and continued to circulate forbidden literature after 1933. Your father was caught at the act in 1937 and briefly sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where he was a prisoner for 18 months before returning to the Ruhr, where his skills were needed (West Germany).
11. You were born in 1946. Your father was a Jewish journalist who was forced out of his job during the Nazi regime. Your mother was a Protestant who worked in the office of a large department store. Your father was able to stay safe during the Nazi regime because of his marriage to your mother. You live in what will become East Berlin but your family considers leaving for the West in 1953 (East Germany).
12. You were born in 1946 in the Föhrenwald Displaced Persons camp in the American zone. Your parents are both German-Jewish survivors of the concentration camp at Dachau. They try to rebuild Jewish life in Germany, living in the small town near Munich where your mother was born. Your father is a pharmacist whose previous business, whose accounts your mother had managed, was confiscated in the 1930s (West Germany).
13. You were born in New York City in exile in 1942. Your parents were both committed Communist Party members and atheists who returned to their native Dortmund in 1945 and hope to work for a united, socialist Germany (West Germany).
14. Your parents are two of the expellees from the former German lands after the war. They are considered "ethnic Germans," but in fact are much more at home speaking Lithuanian, Polish, or Russian. They were peasants who engaged in subsistence farming. You were born in 1946 in a refugee camp near Kiel (West Germany).
15. Your parents are two of the expellees from Eastern Europe. They were both born in what is now Czechoslovakia, but grew up in German-speaking bourgeois homes. Your father was a highly-skilled jeweler and goldsmith, and the family has lost its successful business and large house in Prague. You were born in 1946 as a refugee in the Soviet Zone of occupation (East Germany).

16. You were adopted from the Pognitz DP camp in 1946. You were perhaps three or four years old. Your adoptive parents, whose only child was killed in an aerial bombing, do not know anything about your biological parentage or birthplace. Although they know you did not speak German at first, they did not understand or recognize the words of your previous language. Your father is a housepainter and your mother is a cleaning woman. They are devout Catholics who live in a small town in upper Bavaria (West Germany).
17. You were born in 1935 in Hamburg. Your father was an African student from German West Africa. Your mother, the daughter of a Calvinist minister, was studying at the same university to be a teacher. The Nazis expelled your father from the university before he could complete his degree, though he later joined the navy during the war. He died in 1944. You and your mother still live in Hamburg (West Germany).
18. You were born in 1948 in Chemnitz (Karl-Marx-Stadt). Your father was a factory foreman at an Audi plant throughout the 1930s and 1940s. After management fled to the West in 1945, he joined the Communist Party and rose to become a senior factory official. Your mother worked for a textile firm in the 1930s and 1940s and became an SED official in 1946 (East Germany).

**Prompts that I use over a ten-week quarter for biweekly entries:**

**Prompt #1:**

By October 10th, please write a ~750 word installment that tells us something about the biography of your character's family, since you are presumably still a very small child.

Remember that you are responsible for writing your own installment and commenting on your group members' stories.

Consider questions such as: what were the circumstances of your birth? How did your family feel about your birth? How did your parents experience the immediate aftermath of World War Two? What did your parents write on the De-Nazification questionnaire? Consider using the "A Woman in Berlin" diary or the De-Nazification Questionnaire [*Fragebogen*] for direct inspiration.

**Prompt #2:**

By October 19th, please write the second 500-750 word installment of your character's biography, which is about how your character experienced life up until 1961. Consider answering one of the following questions:

How did you (or your parents) react to the news of June 17, 1953? Who did you think was responsible?

How did you feel as it became clear that Germany was going to be divided more permanently?

What did you think about the news of refugees from the East to the West? Did you know somebody profiled in *Beyond the Berlin Wall*? What was your take on their story?

What was it like being a teenager in your part of Germany? Did your family debate whether or not to participate in the *Jugendweihe*? How did the "Economic Miracle" affect your family?

### **Prompt #3:**

Please use this entry to respond directly to either the construction of the Berlin Wall or to *The Wall Jumper*. You have a few options: you could pretend to have met somebody in the story (everyone had a reason to go to West/East Berlin at some point), you could pretend to have heard one of the stories that Peter Schneider tells, or you could pretend that you were reading the book when it was released in 1982.

We'll be back to the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s (for the student movement, Baader-Meinhof terrorism, environmental movement) for the next entry (due in two weeks), so this may turn out to be slightly non-chronological.

### **Prompt #4:**

You can write about anything between 1961 and 1989, and there's a lot of potential material to comment on here:

- The June 2 Movement and the RAF
- The NATO dual-track decision, the peace movement, the Green Party
- Love and marriage (it may be time for your avatar to settle down and have a child of their own--or not settle down!)
- Some aspect of everyday life in East Germany/for West Germans visiting the East
- The Stasi (which was involved in all of the above!)

You're free to write 750 words about any of these topics. You're also free to jump back in time, but the key point is that the Wall is still up.

FYI, the final entry, which is due on November 30th, will ask you to respond in some way to the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification, which may include actually finding your Stasi file or that of a friend/family member.

### **Prompt #5:**

For this entry, you can write about anything that happened since 1989: this should include some kind of reflection on German re/unification (unless your character is like that woman in *Goodbye Lenin!* who fell into a coma and missed the whole thing).

This may include being able to view your Stasi file (for either East or West Germans) and being able to revisit some of your memories in a new light.

Consider some of the following questions:

- Did you expect unification?

- Were you happy about how it happened or did you want East Germany to try and reform? How did you feel about the "final borders" of Germany?
- Did reunification become an opportunity for you and your family to make money, or did it hurt your family economically?
- Like Jana Hensel, do you have nostalgia for certain aspects of life in East Germany? What do you miss?