

The only book Charles Lucas always had with him was the New Testament. "The things he valued most after his God were money, women and bars," came the wry observation by an official of the East German spy agency, the Stasi, who criticized Lucas' poor German while noting his poor command of English as well.

Born on Dec. 10, 1916 in Xenia, Ohio, Lucas was a cheerful somewhat unremarkable person. His father died young and his mother raised him and his two sisters alone, working as a cleaner and laundress to support her family. Primary school and two years of high school were followed by the Great Depression and unemployment. In the mid-1930s, Lucas' future looked bleak.

Then he was admitted to the Civilian Conservation Corps, a job creation service, which his later Stasi handlers would compare to the "Nazi labor agency." After a few years of washing cars and working as a metal worker, Lucas ended up in the military.

Like thousands of others, he was sent to Europe to rid the continent of the Nazis, serving until the end of the war on a navy ship. After three years and a divorce in Ohio, he returned to Europe in March 1949, to Germany, as a member of the U.S. army.

Lucas first came to the attention of the Stasi after defecting through the Iron Curtain to Potsdam, in East Germany. Lucas believed the world was better and more just under communism. It would turn out to be a big mistake.

People like Lucas were a problem for the U.S. government. In the 1950s, East and West were fighting a war of ideology over which system was more just, more free, better for people: the capitalist, democratic American system or Soviet-style communism? The "Land of the Free" entered the war to bring freedom to Europe, democracy to Germans and to

my obligation & promise
 I Charles Lucas, am ready to support
 state Department of state Security (Secret Service
 from the German Democratic Republic) to safe
 the Peace of World and the Safety from the
 Peoples in the D. D. R. and world
 I know that Imperialist Powers ~~will~~ try
 to disturb the peaceful construction from the
 D. D. R.
 So I obligate me every detail, and also it
 will be little about all remarks reaction work
 to tell the Officer from the Secret Department
 at once.
 So I also obligate me to keep silence about
 my connections to the state Department of State
 Security to everybody, also the other Offices and
 Departments. Just so I'll keep silence to my nearest
 friends also girl friends, Neighbors & friends
 I know that a break of this obligation is
 punishable and I would come to prison
 I will sign my signature and my
 reports with the name of Joe Baker
 Charles Lucas
 geborn 10, 12, 1916
 Oct 5, 1955

prove to the world that good comes from America.

Which might explain why, on Dec. 9, 1952, even the New York Times reported the story of the black GI they named "Karl Lucas." "While there is race discrimination in the U.S., in the Soviet Union all people are equal," he once told an East German newspaper.

In the months after the end of the war, black-American newspapers like the Chicago Defender had already carried reports about "Russia's fight against racism." The Pittsburgh Courier reported that many soldiers listed as miss-

ing, absent without leave or deserters were actually part of an "invisible army" wandering across Europe on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In his novel, "Last of the Conquerors," the black-American writer William Gardner Smith, who had served in Germany in 1947, described the "Eastern Zone" as the preferred destination of those who did not want to return to the U.S.

Lucas was clearly not the only soldier toying with the idea of defecting to East Germany, with the certainty that the socialist promise of equality for all also applied to black

people. But what had initially awakened the black soldier's doubts that it could be better somewhere else than at home?

Like Lucas, hundreds of thousands of black-American soldiers had come to Germany and were amazed by what they found. The former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, who was stationed in Germany in 1958, described the experience in his book, "My American Journey": "For black GIs, especially those out of the South, Germany was a breath of freedom — they could go where they wanted, eat where they wanted, and date whom they wanted, just like other people.

The dollar was strong, the beer good, and the German people friendly..."

In 1946, Newsweek reported that many Americans treated black-American soldiers worse than the majority of Germans. The U.S. military newspaper Stars and Stripes admitted that white soldiers were the main source of racism against their black colleagues.

Ironically, in a country where only a few weeks earlier murderous racism held sway, the black soldiers, after some initial suspicion, experienced something approaching equality. "Germany was a very special place for black soldiers because for the first time, they experienced a society without legal race restrictions," said Maria Höhn, a German historian teaching at Vassar College in New York. "They came to Germany and thought: 'It's going to be pretty bad for us as black soldiers in the land of Hitler and the Nazis.' But it was exactly the opposite. For the first time, they could go into a bar or into restaurants, they could even go out with a white German woman." In fact, the life of black-American soldiers in the land of racist murderers and concentration camps was actually better than at home, especially than in the southern states, where a black man could not get close to a white woman and where lynching still existed.

The unanswered question in those days was "how is it that a segregated army is trying to educate the (West) Germans toward democracy?" Gradually, black GIs in Europe and black activists back home arrived at the conviction, which had begun to take shape in The Crisis, the newspaper of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), ever since the Nazi race laws: We are fighting for a world in which lynching, violence, terror, humiliation and degradation through discrimina-

Charly Lucas' big mistake

The defection of a black-American soldier to East Germany created a problem for the U.S. and eventually cost him his life

By Peter H. Koepf

The postwar years in Germany opened the eyes of many black American soldiers stationed there. In the land of racial murder and concentration camps, of all places, these soldiers experienced an unexpected freedom. Because the American segregation laws made their lives more difficult, many did not want to return home. Charles Lucas was one of them. He defected to East Germany because he believed things would be better under communism.



FEDERAL ARCHIVE OF THE COMMISSIONER FOR STASI RECORDS



VERLAG FÜR BERLIN-BRANDENBURG

tion is abolished. This fight must begin in Washington.

In the 1940s and 1950s, tens of thousands of returning black soldiers signed up for the civil rights movement. Many of its later activists had previously fought in World War II or served in Europe. Now, these veterans were demonstrating in many of the southern states for their unimpeded voting rights and against racial segregation.

But Lucas preferred to place his trust in a future in Bautzen, in commu-

nist East Germany, where he lived at Platz der Roten Armee 4. But he was far from being a committed communist. The records show he was a card-carrying member of only the East German trade union association, the FDGB, and the BSG Post boxing club. He worked as a cook and baker in the canteen of the Konsum department store, where his status as an "American defector" meant the Stasi kept a close eye on him. Lucas' Stasi file, about 220 pages, is kept in the federal archive of the commissioner for Stasi records

along with those of other deserters. The Stasi agents appeared to be satisfied with Lucas' behavior. Staff Sergeant Hübner of the Bautzen Stasi office reported "that in his political views, he is impressed by the successes of the GDR and actively supports its development."

In the clubhouse for foreigners and in public, he expressed "positive goals," the report said. Cadre instructor Schmieger and cadre leader Kasper from the state-owned Bautzen Waggonbau railcar building com-

pany, where Lucas worked from April 1955 attested that he had "a positive attitude to our workers' and farmers' state as well as the Soviet Union." The Stasi also recruited him as an informant, mainly to observe the foreigners in the Clubhouse of International Solidarity and report on any escape plans, which Lucas dutifully did. On Oct. 5, 1955, he signed a handwritten note in English, stating that he was ready to support the Stasi "to safe the Peace of the World and the Safety from the Peoples in the D.D.R. and world. I know the Imperialist powers try to disturb the peaceful construction from the D.D.R." [sic]. He was to sign his reports with the name Joe Baker.

But Lucas preferred to be simply Charly. And he still had only one real passion — women. And many of them were happy to respond to the tall, athletic American with the moustache and the full lips. And he was generous to them, so much so that he owed money everywhere.

There were those who said the women were using him but some of them were clearly serious about Lucas. He seemed to be so important to his last girlfriend in West Germany that she was willing to defect to the East with him. And for his part, it seems likely that it was this woman, not the communist dream, that was the real reason for Lucas's defection to the East. In 1951, his employer, the

U.S. army, had ordered Lucas' unit to be deployed to South Korea. He would not have been able to take his fiancée with him so they both fled to the Soviet occupation zone and Lucas became a deserter and a Stasi spy.

But Lucas didn't stay happy for long, at least not with his partner in defection. In February 1952, the Stasi recorded that Lucas was once more "unattached" but not without girlfriends.

Lucas' story ends on June 12, 1956. He missed the opportunity to travel, according to one girlfriend's statement, and was obviously thinking about fleeing East Germany. He did not want to make an official application to leave because then he would have had to go to prison for five years or more for desertion in the West. At the end of March 1956, he married one of his girlfriends, who found him often silent and melancholy. During later questioning by the East German People's Police, she said her husband was already dead and forensic reports ruled it a suicide: He had turned on the gas tap in the kitchen. In photos of the scene, he can be seen lying on a sofa, beside which, on a table, lies a copy of the New Testament. He found his last resting place in the Protestant cemetery. His widow did not allow any of his other "acquaintances" to attend the burial.

Where experts meet:

African-American Civil Rights and Germany in the 20th Century. Conference at Vassar College (Poughkeepsie, NY), Oct. 1-4, jointly organized by the German Historical Institute, Washington D.C. and Vassar College. See: <http://www.aacvr-germany.org>

Book recommendation:

"GIs and Fräuleins. The German American Encounter in 1950s West Germany," by Maria Höhn, UNC Press, 2002 (Deutsche Übersetzung: "Amis, Cadillac und 'Negerliebchen' - GIs im Nachkriegsdeutschland," 2008, Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg)

For related articles please visit www.atlantic-times.de

An Unexpected Freedom: What black U.S. soldiers experienced in Germany after the war - April 2009
 Should They Be Allowed? What happens when German historians research racism in America? - July 2009