

THE



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TELEVISION

Reunited or remaining split

THE reunification of Germany, as explored in a splendidly cynical *Late Show* (BBC 2) interview last night, of Wolf Biermann by Nigel Williams, is unlikely to find much of an echo in Korea. Earlier on the same channel, Brian Barron came up with an intriguing documentary for *Assignment*, contrasting the economic recovery of South Korea with the monolithic bankruptcy of the North at a time when the megalomaniac pyramids of Kim Il Sung stand empty because nobody can afford the glass for their windows.

Asked how long the present northern regime could survive after Kim Il Sung is replaced by his anthem-writing son, a Moscow observer reckoned anywhere from two hours to two years; but in the meantime the old man is still there, exerting his baleful Orwellian influence on the ultimate paranoid society. Meanwhile, across 150 miles of barbed wire, 40,000 American servicemen continue to prop up the security of the South, 40 years after the war that first took them to fight there.

Like Hong Kong, South Korea is the economic envy of its communist neighbours. But, for as long as Kim remains so powerful a god that an apparently amiable young woman can cheerfully admit to camera her murder, in his name, of 116 people aboard a South Korean jet, the chances are that there will be little political change. "Any other young person in North Korea would have been proud to do what I did," the perpetrator announced, over reconstructed film of an airliner having its insides torn out as bodies flew through the windows. Ideology still makes a powerful frontier.

As for Wolf Biermann, the rogue troubadour whose father died in Auschwitz defected from Hamburg to East Berlin in 1953. He was among the first to criticise a corrupt regime there, as a result of which he was duly exiled back to his homeland from his fatherland, and remains one of the great

exponents of the "plague on both your houses" school of Central European political philosophy.

His singing of his own songs suggests Gilbert Becaud in the Berliner Ensemble, but Williams's intelligent interview brought out some superb verbal images, including the cadaver of communism stinking around the world, and the thought that it did not need the tearing down of the Berlin Wall to tell a man who had climbed across it in both directions that there might now be a way through the middle.

Monday's *Abroad in Britain* on BBC 2 found Jonathan Meades looking more than ever like a rent collector from the Mafia, as his dark glasses and shoulder-padding grow wider by the week. His lugubrious search for the architecturally and socially exotic, a useful counterpart to Lucinda Lambton's

more manic treks around the merely bizarre, led him this week to a series of local Bohemias, in the Isle of Wight, West Sussex and west London. Meades is finding his place halfway between James Lees-Milne and Nikolaus Pevsner, never better than when worrying about whether there are places in Bohemia called England, or why *Little Red Riding Hood* should have come from there: "Local girl makes good in sexual allegory."

More and more in this series the true star is Meades's producer, Russell England. When some interviewee is proving more than usually turgid, England has his presenter tiptoeing ostentatiously out of the back door, or trying desperately to escape over the garden wall from some unusually ghastly example of Betjermania.

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