
BACKGROUND BOOKS

BERLIN

Few major cities in the world have been more buffeted by politics in the 20th century than Berlin. Yet unlike other major West European capitals—Rome, Paris, London—old Berlin bloomed late as a cosmopolitan center. “Prior to 1871,” as Gerhard Masur points out in **Imperial Berlin** (Basic, 1971), “the great powers of the world would not have considered the city worth the price of a bitter international struggle.”

The city, writes Gordon A. Craig in **The Germans** (Penguin, 1983), was founded late in the 12th century as a tiny trading settlement on the banks of the Spree River. Enjoying relative peace and freedom under the margraves of Brandenburg, Craig observes, Berlin was a typical medieval market town, which boasted “a patriciate of great merchants and nobles, a *Bürgerium* of masters of trades and handicrafts, organized in guilds, a Jewish community, and a sizeable transient population.”

In 1442, the state of Brandenburg fell under the control of the Hohenzollern dynasty, and Berlin served as the residence of the Kurfürsten, or “prince-electors” (who helped select the Holy Roman emperor). Although the Kurfürsten attracted bankers, court purveyors, and a new class of tradesmen to the city, Berlin, writes A. J. P. Taylor in **The Course of German History** (Putnam’s, 1962), remained an “overgrown military camp,” still “remote and obscure.” But the Hohenzollerns would strengthen and expand the state of Brandenburg by annexing East Prussia, thus leading the way to the crowning of Frederick I, “King in Prussia,” in 1701.

Under Frederick I, and especially under his grandson, Frederick the Great (1712–86), Berlin began to achieve a certain distinction. During the 18th century, Prussian monarchs enlarged the city by merging it with neighboring

Köln. They founded the Academy of Sciences, and built many of today’s landmarks, including the Opera House (1743) and the Brandenburg Gate (1791)—the great ceremonial Doric gateway that stood as a symbol of Prussian strength and unity.

The 19th century severely tested the Prussian monarchy. Napoleon’s armies occupied the capital for two years (1806–08). And the revolutionary turbulence that swept across Europe in 1848—brought on by unemployment and poor working conditions—reached Berlin too.

The fighting that took place on March 18, 1848, between workers and government troops, says Hajo Holborn in **History of Modern Germany, Vol. 3, 1840–1945** (Princeton, 1982), took the lives of 250 Berliners. The soldiers suppressed the revolt, but, as Holborn writes, the angry rioters afterward paraded the “March Dead” through the palace courtyard, while King Frederick William IV stood by, watching “the macabre show.”

Meanwhile, Berlin, with the growth of its porcelain, textile, and iron industries, was developing into a factory city. By the time it became capital of the new, enlarged, unified German Reich—which Chancellor Otto von Bismarck formed after Prussia defeated France in 1871—Berlin boasted a cosmopolitan population of one million. The city, observes A. J. Ryder in **Twentieth Century Germany** (Columbia, 1973), represented “a study in contrasts . . . an industrial giant set among the sandy forests of Brandenburg, the radical capital of a highly conservative state, a centre of avant-garde artists in a metropolis characterized by ostentatious new wealth and the grey proletarian suburbs.”

For Berliners, World War I meant not only the loss of loved ones but also the

rationing of food, the "turnip winter" of 1916-17, and, at war's end, massive workers' strikes and the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II. David Childs' **Germany Since 1918** (St. Martin's, 1980) recounts the city's and the nation's struggle to recover. Some two million Germans perished during the war.

Though often referred to as the "Golden Twenties," the much-romanticized Weimar Republic (1919-33) was, as Otto Friedrich says in **Before the Deluge** (Fromm, 1986), a time of great suffering. Food was still scarce, joblessness high, and the rate of inflation soared. Friedrich cites novelist Klaus Mann's description of the prostitutes who strolled "like fierce amazons" along the Kurfürstendamm. "One of them," Mann wrote, "... whispered into my ear: 'Want to be my slave? Costs only six billion and a cigarette. A bargain.'"

The era, however, was "golden" in a cultural sense. During these years, men such as filmmaker Fritz Lang, architect Walter Gropius, playwright Bertolt Brecht, and artist Wassily Kandinsky all flocked to Berlin. The renaissance they created, writes Peter Gay in **Weimar Culture** (Greenwood, 1981), represented a reaction to the apparent "disappearance of God, the threat of the machine, the incurable stupidity of the upper classes, and the helpless philistinism of the bourgeoisie."

Adolf Hitler's ascent to power in 1933 ended not only the Republic but also Berlin's spirit of tolerance. The capital became the site of book burnings, Nazi torchlight parades through the Brandenburg Gate, and raids on synagogues and Jewish businesses ("Crystal Night," No-

vember 9, 1938). Unfortunately, the best works in English on the Nazi period, such as Joachim C. Fest's **Hitler** (Random, 1975); Karl Dietrich Bracher's **German Dictatorship** (Holt, 1972); and Alan Bullock's **Hitler** (Harper, 1971), say little about daily life in the city; they focus instead on the rise and fall of the Führer's regime, its horrors, and World War II.

As it happens, there is no shortage of vivid chronicles of the postwar division of Berlin and the three Cold War crises. These include Lucius D. Clay's **Decision in Germany** (Greenwood, 1950); Philip Windsor's **City On Leave** (Praeger, 1963); and Jean Edward Smith's **Defense of Berlin** (Johns Hopkins, 1963). Two of the most illuminating accounts of the events leading to the building of the Communists' "anti-fascist barricade" in the summer of 1961 are Curtis Cate's **Ides of August** (Evans, 1979) and Honoré M. Catudal's **Kennedy and the Berlin Wall Crisis** (International Publications, 1980).

Today, visitors usually find West Berlin a bright, bustling place. But on a harsh winter's day, the larger cityscape, with its ugly Wall and grey Eastern sector, still can remind one of the scene that Christopher Isherwood described in his **Berlin Stories** (Bentley, 1979). Berlin, he wrote in 1935, "is a skeleton which aches in the cold... I feel in my bones the sharp ache of the frost in the girders of the overhead railway, in the ironwork of balconies, in bridges, in tramlines, lamp-standards, latrines... the city, which glowed so brightly and invitingly in the night sky above the plains, is cold and cruel and dead."