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Berlin – the History of a Rapidly Changing City

After the reunification on October 3, 1990, history catapulted this city of 3.4 million people into an entirely new situation. Today, Berlin is a world capital in the heart of Europe, the new yet old German capital, the hub for East and West, and – together with Brandenburg – the third largest urban center on the continent. Berlin is a rival to be taken seriously of Paris, London, and New York.

Although this may all appear somewhat dramatic and new to contemporaries, the city's urban history remains faithful to itself. More than any other German city, Berlin's history has always been marked by upheavals and change. Over the centuries, Prussian monarchs, various statesmen, and one dictator have tried to change the city to fit to their own personal ideas. Due to its rapid rise to the status of metropolis in less than a hundred years, its urban developments have been more radical and impulsive than elsewhere.

By historical standards, Berlin is a young city. It was founded by traveling merchants as the twin settlement of Berlin and Coelln sometime during the last quarter of the twelfth century. The first historical mention in civic documents was in 1237 for Coelln and in 1244 for Berlin. The origin of the city's name is the subject of heated discussion even today. Some historians argue that it is a combination of two Slavic words (bar for pine forest and rolina for field). But it does not refer to the Berlin bear that has embellished the city's coat of arms since 1280. Because of its outstanding strategic location, the twin city soon rose to become the Mark Brandenburg's leading commercial and trade center. But Berlin earned its growth at the cost of its civic freedom. first with respect to the Askanier, and from the early fifteenth century with the Hohenzollern.

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Around 1550, twelve thousand people already lived on the Spree River. A century later, after nearly complete destruction during the Thirty Years' War, Berlin experienced an unprecedented cultural as well as economic boom thanks to the Great Elector Friedrich Wilhelm. He invited immigrants to settle the city, notably Jews and Huguenots. By 1700, one out of every five Berliners was a Huguenot. Successive Prussian kings, in particular Friedrich II known as "Frederick the Great", built Berlin into their Prussian royal seat. Architects like Schlüter and later Knobelsdorff and Schinkel endowed the city with their own special style. It wasn't until recent times that the historic centre of Berlin along Unter den Linden once again underwent such a major facelift.

The nineteenth century got off to a somewhat unspectacular start in Berlin but by the time it drew to a close Berlin had become a world-class metropolis. In 1871, it became the capital of the newly founded German Empire. On Bismarck's initiative, the Kurfürstendamm was remodeled after the Champs Elysées and was given its present, grand look. Big business in the form of electrical and chemical companies hired thousands of workers who flocked to the city from Silesia, Pomerania, and East Prussia. Banks and insurance companies set up headquarters in the city. By the turn of the century, Berlin's population had grown to more than two million. It was only in 1920, though, that Berlin as it stands today was formed from the joining together of seven cities, fifty-nine rural communities, and twenty-seven manorial properties. At the time, this was viewed as artificial, but it has since grown to appear completely normal.

With World War I, the inexorable rise of Wilhemian Berlin came to an abrupt end. In the crowded tenements, workers' families of up to ten people were crammed into cramped apartments while the "New West" around the Kurfürstendamm grew to be an extravagant boulevard. In the 1920s, bars, night cafés, small cabarets, and variety theaters offered a tawdry mixture of cabaret and bohemian culture. Those who at the time wanted to make it as an artists, actors, or writers in Europe had to present themselves to the Berlin audience. The city had all the trappings of a metropolis that

stage-managed itself, and the rest of the country looked on in astonishment or else set off themselves for the capital. Tourism boomed between the wars, and many visitors ended up staying. That's why Kurt Tucholsky once said that you are not born a Berliner, you become one.

During this period, Berlin had many world-class sights worth seeing that still exist today (at least in the memory) – the Potsdamer Platz with Europe's first traffic lights, the biggest variety shows at the "Wintergarten", the "Scala", or the "Admiralspalast". The first large tradeshows like the Green Week in 1926 or the First German Radio Exhibition in 1924 drew thousands of visitors. Motor racing on the AVUS or the Six Day Bicycle Race were other events were additional highlights for tourists who could select from nearly 150 daily newspapers in the capital.

But this frenzy resembled a dance on a volcano whose eruption followed on January 30, 1933 when Adolf Hitler was named German Chancellor. Berlin, too, suffered the annihilation of its Jewish community: out of 160,000 Jewish Berliners living in the city before 1933, many fled into exile. One third were murdered in concentration camps. In fact, Berlin was never to recover from this blow against Jewish artists, intellectuals, and scientists. At the end of World War II, Berlin had more than 28.5 square kilometers of sheer ruins (twice that of Dresden), making it Germany's largest uninterrupted landscape of ruins. Hitler's grandiose dreams of a "World Capital Germania" were literally smashed in the hail of bombs, leaving few traces in the cityscape. The Berliners survived the bitter post-war years thanks to the "Trümmerfrauen" (the rubble women) who cleared away the huge piles of rubble. The few remaining trees in Tiergarten did not survive the cold winter of 1946-47, being chopped down for firewood.

Berlin's post-war history was marked by crises that were sometimes the causes, sometimes the consequences of the global struggle for power of the systems in the East and the West. In 1947, the Soviet representative left the Allied Command, bringing a de facto end to the Four Power administration of the city. With the blockade

of West Berlin in 1948-49, the city's fate was sealed. During the night of August 3, 1961, the regime of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany erected a Wall which separated the eastern sectors of Berlin from the rest of the city.

The 155-kilometer long Berlin Wall, which ran through the city, was a unique sight and the major tourist attraction in West Berlin for almost thirty years. East Berlin celebrated itself with mass rallies and socialist architecture. The ideological contest between the systems was staged here, between the "display window of the West" and the "capital of East Germany". It climaxed during the 750th anniversary celebrations of Berlin in 1987. Only today has it become evident that the thirty years of obduracy in both halves of the city was the historic exception. The day the Wall came down, Berlin returned to its old history.

In the meantime Berlin is mercurial as ever and for that reason still remains precisely Berlin. This also applies to the year 2007 and beyond. Even if the face of several parts of the city continues to change, the metropolis on the Spree will become even more attractive to tourists thanks to the combination of the historical urban landscape and the new architecture. The shimmering history of Berlin will determine its future more than in other cities. And something new will always follow.

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