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# Travels Through History

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## Summer in Berlin

By Esther Devai

Germany has had a turbulent past; the country's history has been dotted by battles, political struggles, and religious upheavals, even long before the formation of the German nation-state in 1871. However, no series of events are quite as firmly fixed in the modern mind as Adolf Hitler's rise to power, the Holocaust, the Cold War, and the subsequent division of the nation symbolized by the Berlin wall. From its humble beginnings as a hamlet, to its rise as to global prominence during the 1940s, Berlin has been a prime example of the impact of war and politics on the landscape of a nation. Berlin, Germany's capital city, has been central to many of the political upheavals which form so large a part of the country's narrative. I have always had particular interest in German history and was thrilled when the opportunity to visit presented itself.

Berlin emerged as an important cultural metropolis in the early twentieth-century, and during the 1910s through the '20s was famed for its perceived moral excesses and avant-garde culture. It was at the forefront of industrial change during the late nineteenth-century and that emphasis on progress remained characteristic of the city until Hitler's rise to power in 1933. Musicians, artists, and scientists thrived in the bohemian atmosphere of the city. In *Reading Berlin 1900*, historian Peter Fritzsche sheds light on the cultural movements of the time:

Berlin in 1911—nearly four million inhabitants in a brand new industrial conglomeration—contained its own version of disorder...which...challenged nineteenth-century certainties again and again. To account for this unstable perceptual field, writers and artists experimented with new representational techniques. The... antinarratives of the modern novel, the disruptions and displacements of

Expressionist poetry...can be summed up as modernism.<sup>1</sup>

Upon our arrival in Berlin, we took the metro to our centuries old apartment and lugged our many heavy suitcases up the creakiest stairs known to man. Every so often a door would open and our neighbors would peek out, curious to see who intruded upon their silence. Once we reached the top, I opened the leaded glass window and took my first view Berlin. The beauty of European architecture, its structure and mathematical precision, a testament to Berlin's artistic roots, made us eager to explore.

I was very conscious of the historical significance of the places we visited during that day. Every step I took was treading on hundreds of years of history, and seeing the actual buildings, monuments, and landmarks that I had heard of and read about was shockingly real. As time passes, history fades into memory, and while I was previously conscious of the events and places, they truly became living realities as we walked.

Among the sites which caused the deepest impression on me was the Berlin wall. The moment I stepped into the square which houses the crumbling remnants of the structure, I felt a heaviness settle over me that is difficult to explain. The day had grown gray and overcast, and we slowly walked past the old guard tower and double fences topped with barbed wire to view the pile of bricks that represents so much of what is wrong with humanity. I felt the desperation and sadness of that place so palpably, it was as though a cloud formed over me. The bits of the wall that remained were covered in graffiti, a lasting testament to the frustration and anger felt by those imprisoned by its existence. To one side stands a plaque covered in photographs; these are the dead, killed, attempting to escape their cage. Although I had read about the war, the wall and all it represented, being in that space and seeing the faces of those who had been killed in an effort to regain their freedom was entirely different than abstractly studying about them in a textbook. Here was history brought to life. Of all the locations we visited, this left the strongest impression on my mind. This was not merely a memorial, or a display; here was the literal means of subjugation which was used to separate families

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 14.

and countrymen. The very place where I walked was the place where hundreds had taken their final breaths. It was a sobering thought.

Our visit to the wall brought to the forefront of my mind the events surrounding not only the erection of it, but also the repercussions it caused during the years following its construction. The emphasis of our current president on building a wall separating our country from Mexico struck me as a sad parallel. The separation of countries in so tangible and visible a manner cannot help but create problems within our social construct, just as it did in Berlin. While Berlin suffered because of familial separation, loss of jobs, and loss of freedom to traverse the city, our modern world is struggling with more intangible issues such as racism, which can only be exacerbated by the drawing of such a clear distinction between one country and the next. I have witnessed firsthand what the ideologies of separation by race, class, or sex can bring, and unfortunately, it appears that instead of learning from the experiences of other countries, enthusiastic approval has been showered on President Trump for a plan which eerily mirrors the events which only recently occurred.

From the Berlin Wall memorial, we set off to find the Holocaust Memorial, or the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, as it is officially known. Strategically placed near the former location of the Reich Chancellery, from which Hitler conducted much of his official business and also squarely in the area where the Berlin wall divided the city, the memorial stands as a moving tribute to the events which so deeply marked the nation's historical landscape. From a distance, the memorial emerges as a striking visual focus, pulling the eye to what appears to be a cemetery or a city in miniature. Moving closer, the somber gray of the concrete stelae stand in stark relief, casting dark shadows upon the narrow halls between the blocks. As I entered the memorial, the ground sloped sharply beneath my feet, creating an uneasy sense of imbalance. The blocks are free of inscription or chiseling, thus evoking a claustrophobic impression of walls closing in on the viewer, calling to mind a gas chamber, or the suffocating structure of a hidden room. As I followed the narrow walkways, I lost sight of my family, although I could hear their voices echoing from the smooth surfaces. The deeper I entered the maze, the quieter outside sounds grew, until I became surrounded by nothing but gray, constricting, somber weight. This memorial is entirely about

sensation and emotion. All I saw was gray, all I felt was quiet, heaviness, loneliness, and confusion. Although there have been critics of the memorial, particularly in regards to the lack of inscription or plaque on or near the memorial, I felt that it truly captured the essence of what the victims of the holocaust must have felt, although of course, on an infinitely smaller scale. The separation of families, isolation, and ostracization, are all encapsulated in the installation.

The overall impression I had of current Berlin society was one of tolerance and acceptance. I felt as though there was a certain relish for life, and openness to new ideas. The dark chapters that mar German history felt ever present, in that they are openly acknowledged, yet their painful legacies are now used to bolster progress. I felt as though there was a concerted effort to be as completely opposite to the values of the past as possible. Berlin feels young, fresh, and full of energy and purpose. The city comes vibrantly alive at night, with shops, stores, and restaurants open till the wee hours of the morning, and hundreds of young people congregating in droves, laughing, talking, and drinking. At night, the next generation comes out to play, reveling in their freedom, escaping the restrictions of work or school. Here lies the beauty of this city. Berlin is a city full of hope, of looking to the future and making it the best it can be. I have traveled to various countries, and I can honestly say that the German people I encountered were ineffably polite, kind, and warm. There is also a very clear sense of self, a loose, easy movement, which I particularly enjoyed. Berliners are, in a word, cool. I would wholeheartedly recommend any lover of history to visit this beautiful city and experience the historical treasures it has to offer.

## **Bibliography**

Fritzsche, Peter. *Reading Berlin 1900*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

### **Author Bio**

Esther Devai is a fashion design student who is passionate about history, languages, and art. She graduated with an Associate's in Family and Consumer Sciences from Sierra College in Rocklin, California, and will now continue her education and work towards gaining a Bachelor's degree. She plans to pursue fashion, with possible minors in communications and business. She one day hopes to become a costume designer and open her own boutique. She also enjoys writing, and would someday love to write a children's book. In her spare time she reads every book she can find, particularly historical ones, bakes far too many cakes, and has recently become obsessed with embroidery. If she could go anywhere in the world at this moment, she would choose Egypt.

