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# Introduction

THIS IS a book about ancient history.

Although the events it describes took place within the living memory of thousands of people, including the author's, this could be a book about Caesar's Gallic Wars, so remote do those events now seem. Given the harsh realities of the first third of the twenty-first century, the 1920s and 1930s might seem closer to us than the years after 1945, as the Cold War fades into an increasingly distant past.

Why, then, should we bother with a book specifically about West Berlin between 1945 and 1994? To answer this question, let us turn first to the Berlin of the present.

"Poor but sexy." Klaus Wowereit's description of Berlin in 2003 could serve as the motto for the burgeoning capital city that he governed as mayor from 2001 to 2014. Chronically short of funds, faced with massive budget cuts after the mid-2020s, clearly unable with its partners to build an airport adequate to the needs of a major city, perpetually under construction, dealing with an ailing public transport system, struggling with the modern realities of migration and multiculturalism, and unable in 2021 even to conduct a proper election that as a result had to be re-run in 2023, Berlin nevertheless reemerged as a global metropolis, especially after the removal of Germany's capital from Bonn to Berlin in 1999.<sup>1</sup> Decades after Germany's (re)unification in 1990, Berlin remains one of the most contradictory, turbulent, dynamic, and culturally exciting places on the planet, a magnet for the young and the creative, a "cool" city, a receptive site for social experimentation, a breeding ground for alternative lifestyles, the real capital city not only of Germany but in many ways of Europe itself in the first third of the twenty-first century. It is also one of the most popular tourist attractions in the world. In the words of the weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* in 2007, "For Germany and Europe the New Berlin is also a laboratory of the future. . . . The German laboratory for

globalization.”<sup>2</sup> Those lines were written when globalization itself seemed to represent the unstoppable wave of the future. This too has changed in an age of populism and resurgent nationalism, but Berlin’s attractiveness has persisted.

That attractiveness is certainly not rooted in physical charm. As the writer Peter Schneider, a non-Berliner who has lived in the city for over half a century, has put it, “It’s not on account of its beauty, for Berlin is not beautiful. Berlin is the Cinderella of European capitals.”<sup>3</sup> To be sure, the sprawling city is blessed with a remarkable and quite enchanting ring of woods and rivers and lakes, green lungs that it owes to the city’s annexation of its suburbs in 1920. As a result, summers in the city can be especially pleasant. It also contains a number of architectural jewels, many of which stem both from the period of “classic modernity” and from the building boom after 1990. But mostly the city is an architectural hodgepodge, and hardly anyone would claim that the city as a whole is charming or in any way architecturally or physically distinguished.<sup>4</sup>

Schneider also notes that Berlin is “eternally unfinished.”<sup>5</sup> This is hardly a new observation: Schneider reminds us that writers have said for generations that Berlin is “condemned forever to becoming and never to being.”<sup>6</sup> It is a city that has long had a deserved reputation for reinventing and rebuilding itself upon the layers—almost like geological or archeological strata—of its complex and often dark history, starting with its modest beginnings in the thirteenth century and continuing with a long career as a Prussian dynastic and garrison town, followed by its checkered history as an imperial capital after 1871, a center of tragically foreshortened democracy after 1919, and the capital of the monstrous Nazi state after 1933. The city’s history of reinvention continues to the present day.<sup>7</sup> But the layers of its history never entirely disappear; they have a habit of bursting through the surface. The reminders of the past are, in fact, ubiquitous. As a result, the historian Brian Ladd has famously written, Berlin is “haunted” by its past, no matter how vibrant and forward-looking its present.<sup>8</sup>

The city’s history is in turn part of its fascination, for tourists and residents, native Berliners and recent arrivals, Germans and non-Germans alike. Indeed, some of that history has been consciously resurrected in recent years, most notably the old royal palace in the heart of the city. Regarded as the most important profane Baroque building north of the Alps, but destroyed by order of the East German regime in 1950, it has been rebuilt as the Humboldt Forum upon its original site—which also had been the site of the East German Palace of the Republic from 1976 until its own exceedingly controversial demolition in 2006.

Where and how does the former West Berlin—for over four decades a truncated and artificial entity, sustained by Western military occupation and Western largesse—fit into this narrative? As the Cold War itself fades into a historical memory hole, does anyone care about the unique, specific historical experience of West Berlin and West Berliners? Has it left any enduring historical legacy? Is it one of those historical “layers” or “strata” that continue to erupt to the surface and influence Berlin’s present, or (to mix metaphors) has it disappeared into the aforementioned memory hole? Is it worth studying, both on its own terms and as part of the larger history of Germany and the global Cold War?

For some time even before 1989, West Berlin’s older, “heroic” reputation, drawn from the Cold War confrontations of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, had largely disappeared. By the 1980s it was no longer primarily regarded in the rest of the Western world as an island of freedom in a totalitarian sea, a showpiece of successful capitalism a hundred miles behind the Iron Curtain. Increasingly it came to be seen, at least by some, as shabby and gray, culturally “edgy,” perhaps, but in a bleak kind of way. Having been abandoned by its traditional industrial base, it came to be seen as a place where corruption and mediocrity increasingly held sway, dependent on subventions and inhabited by the elderly and by young West Germans avoiding the military draft. As the journalist Paul Hockenos has recently written, West Berlin’s “decrepit cityscape” may have held a “morbid charm,” but decrepit it seemed to be, at least to many outsiders.<sup>9</sup> To Peter Schneider, West Berlin was a “luxurious Alcatraz,” a “society without a future.”<sup>10</sup> Henryk Broder was even sharper, asserting that the West Berlin of the 1980s was insular in more than just a political sense: “West Berlin was hysterical, petty, shitty, full of dog crap—a city where you were constantly running your nose into something, because it really was a totally enclosed little enclave. With hysterical people and such a demonstrative survival symbolism.”<sup>11</sup> As we shall see in this book, however, not everyone shared these views. Especially in the 1970s and 1980s, West Berlin came to be regarded by many observers, within and outside the truncated city, as a fascinating *Biotop*, a site of cultural, political, and lifestyle experimentation. Those who moved to West Berlin found it a brilliant alternative both to the stuffiness and conformity of West Germany and to the suffocating state socialism of East Germany. The Swedish writer Lars Gustafsson put it this way years ago: “Two countries could not be more different than the scarred, clever Berlin, with its lively sharp intellect, with its revolutionary groups, its Marxist day care centers . . . and the stupid, money-distended

[Federal Republic] with its supermarkets, its portable TV sets, and its creaking pompous furniture.”<sup>12</sup>

Whether one liked West Berlin or disliked it or was ambivalent about it, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and German unification the following year, it seemed to many observers that the old West Berlin would indeed be forgotten. With several notable exceptions (the area around Potsdamer Platz and the Reichstag building), the former East Berlin was the focus of much of the rebuilding that reshaped the reunited city after the 1990s, while many former West Berliners believed that “their” part of the capital was stagnating and neglected. In 2000 one native West Berliner, citing the head of the East German regime from 1949 to 1971, observed cynically, “Walter Ulbricht always said that West Berlin is located on the territory of the German Democratic Republic. Since 1990 he’s been right.” The once vibrant shopping and tourist districts of West Berlin, notably around the famous Kurfürstendamm (or “Ku’damm”) boulevard, had lost their allure and in fact had become downright shabby in some places. The new East seemed to be where the post-reunification action was, with young people moving into old East Berlin boroughs like Prenzlauer Berg and Friedrichshain (and displacing many of their older inhabitants in the process).

Things began to change after about 2005. Did a kind of “Westalgia” (or *Westalgie*) begin to emerge, at least for a while? The journalist David Wagner, who writes wonderfully about his walks through the post-unification city, describes an encounter in 2011 with a friend as they drink coffee in the Europa Center in what was the commercial heart of the old West Berlin, near the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church (now a monument to the destructiveness of war), the famous (or notorious) Zoo railway station, and the Kurfürstendamm, West Berlin’s once glittering shopping boulevard. At the time of its opening in 1965, and full of shops and restaurants, the Europa Center was regarded as a wonder of modern architecture, eighty-six meters high and topped with a revolving Mercedes star. Wagner observes, “What today looks like a museum of a shopping mall was then a landmark of the city, at least in its western half.” Engaging “in light Westalgia,” Wagner continues, it was no longer necessary to wax sentimental about pre-1933 Berlin. There was now another Berlin for nostalgic reminiscence: “Instead, we could now mourn the passing of pre-reunification Berlin, the happy, sunken island of West Berlin.”<sup>13</sup> A few years later, that same heart of the old West Berlin was rediscovered by architects, investors, and consumers, and by 2015 a full-scale construction boom was underway in the vicinity of the Europa Center and the Zoo

station.<sup>14</sup> In that same year a highly regarded and very popular exhibition on West Berlin took place—at a venue in the old East Berlin.<sup>15</sup> The old West Berlin continues to attract interest to this day. The Allied Museum in the former West Berlin remains a major tourist attraction and research center. Recent commemorations of the 1948–49 airlift and the 1963 visit by John F. Kennedy continue to be well attended. And the site of the legendary Tempelhof Airport is now one of the most popular public parks in Europe. By the late 2000s several general histories of West Berlin began to appear, one in French and two in German. The most extensive, by Wilfried Rott, appeared in 2009. Rott had a very distinguished career as a broadcasting and print journalist in Berlin, and his book is valuable for his insights as a veteran observer of the city. Also in 2009 Jacqueline Hénard, a highly regarded French journalist based in Germany, published her own history of the “island city.” Finally, in 2018 Elke Kimmel, a trained historian with a great deal of experience in public history, produced an account of West Berlin that focuses mainly on the period after the building of the Wall in 1961.<sup>16</sup>

This book is the first history of West Berlin in English. It begins with the Allied occupation of the former capital of Adolf Hitler’s defeated Third Reich in 1945 and ends with the final withdrawal of Allied troops in 1994. It makes use of a wide range of archival materials in Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom. It starts with one fundamental but historically rather obvious premise: that the Cold War city called West Berlin was a distinctive entity, certainly not part of East Germany (of course), but also not really part of West Germany either. During and after the second Berlin crisis from 1958 to 1961, the East Germans and their Soviet mentors increasingly described West Berlin as a “separate political entity,” an argument that the Western Allies vehemently rejected on the grounds that the four wartime victors had never given up their collective, “originary” rights in the entire city, East and West. I shall argue here that West Berlin truly *was* a separate entity, though not in the sense that the East Germans and Soviets meant. Although its situation remained intentionally ambiguous and contested for decades, it was never officially a part of the Federal Republic. As we shall see frequently in this book, the wartime Allies maintained supreme authority in West Berlin (and, they insisted, all Berlin) until midnight struck on 3 October 1990. As a result, the institutions and the culture of West Berlin differed in important ways from the institutions and structures of the Federal Republic. Moreover, West Berlin may have been an experimental *Biotop*, especially after the 1960s or 1970s, but that *Biotop* could hardly have existed without the presence of the Americans, the

British, and the French. Thus this book will devote a significant amount of attention to the relations between the Allies and West Berliners. In doing so, it will explore the interaction between *große Politik* and grand strategy in the Cold War, on the one hand, and the Cold War as lived, grassroots experience on the other. The book will also try to show how, given its unique history, West Berlin was both a very real space and a space that was invested with mythic value and symbolic qualities, by the Western Allies and by West Berlin's leaders—and, indeed, by many ordinary West Berliners. As a result, it was also the site of sustained political theater, a stage upon which a significant part of the drama of the world's division after 1945 could be played out, both as ritual and as reality.

I should note that this is the most personal book I have ever written. Of course, I have done my best throughout to adhere to academic norms of critical scholarship, but I cannot ignore the fact that Berlin has shaped my life like no other place on earth. I first arrived in West Berlin in 1972, at the age of twenty-four, to undertake dissertation research with grants from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). The Quadripartite Agreement and the transit agreements of 1971–72 had just gone into effect. In a sense, my path to Berlin had been prepared for me by Stanford University and especially by my mentor there, Gordon A. Craig, for many years *Honorarprofessor* at the Free University of Berlin. It was in Berlin that I met and married my wife, like me a non-German drawn to that most strangely attractive of cities. For our first date we passed through the then-notorious Friedrichstraße station to attend an opera in East Berlin. We ended up getting married at Rathaus Schmargendorf, a faux-medieval Wilhelmine structure in West Berlin that, we learned, is a favored wedding venue for Berlin's glitterati. We got married there because it contained the civil registry office for the borough in which my wife resided.

Over the course of many years I have lived all over West Berlin, from a student residence in Wedding to a kind of commune in Kreuzberg (in the neighborhood called SO 61, not the more exciting SO 36) to a school building in Wilmersdorf and, ultimately, to the guest apartments of the Historical Commission of Berlin in Nikolassee and the American Academy in Wannsee. I have lived through many of the events described in this book, both inside Berlin and outside the city. I was in West Berlin in the summer of 1989, and though I was not physically present for the events of November 1989, I was again in Berlin in July 1990 when a new currency agreement went into effect and I was also able to walk through the Brandenburg Gate: something that I could not

have imagined would happen in my lifetime. Peter Gay wrote an influential book about Weimar culture as a study of the “outsider as insider.”<sup>17</sup> As far as Berlin, and especially West Berlin, is concerned, I have never been entirely an outsider but certainly not an insider either. But does that odd perspective not describe the circumstances of many Berliners themselves? This account, then, is the partial story of a city I love, but one intermixed, I hope, with critical distance and a dollop, if I have succeeded, of *Berliner Schnauze*.

West Berlin was a place like no other during the Cold War. It was a unique place with a unique history, and one that, in this age of historical forgetfulness, deserves to be told and retold on its own terms. So let this ancient history begin.

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