

Berlin Again by J.A. Moad II

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It's been over fifteen years since I walked alongside the decayed buildings in Berlin's old East side filled with warehouses and old tenement houses that marked the edge of the former East. I remember thinking how the city exemplified the toll and cost of war in the 20th Century like no place I'd ever been. The ruins of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Memorial Church and the remains of bullet-riddled buildings near the former East-West border kept the memory of WW II alive. Reminders of the division between East and West were everywhere at the time, marked by dozens of construction cranes hovering above old buildings. Inside them, squatters, young entrepreneurs and adventurous kids sold what they could, while others set up makeshift bars and discos that kept the night alive—the lingering celebration from November 1989—a party that didn't want to end. And I was a part of that party.



Kaiser-Wilhelm Memorial Church



Brandenburger Tor (gate) - former dividing line between East and West

As I strolled through the city this time, I was amazed at the transformation. The old East had been rebuilt and re-imagined in a way that made everything from the Soviet era seem to disappear. With the exception of key landmarks such as the Brandenburger Tor, The Checkpoint Charlie Museum, and a few buildings waiting for destruction, I found it nearly impossible to distinguish where the city had been divided. With a few exceptions, The Wall has been disassembled and carted away with only a modest imprint of its foundation marked on the ground by a line of stones near the Brandenburger Tor.

Amid all the new construction, the city has added to its mix of amazing museums and monuments. Many of them are stark reminders of the city's dark past: *The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, *The Topography of Terror*, and the Glass Dome of the *Reichstag*—all added since I'd last been to Berlin—were on my list to see.



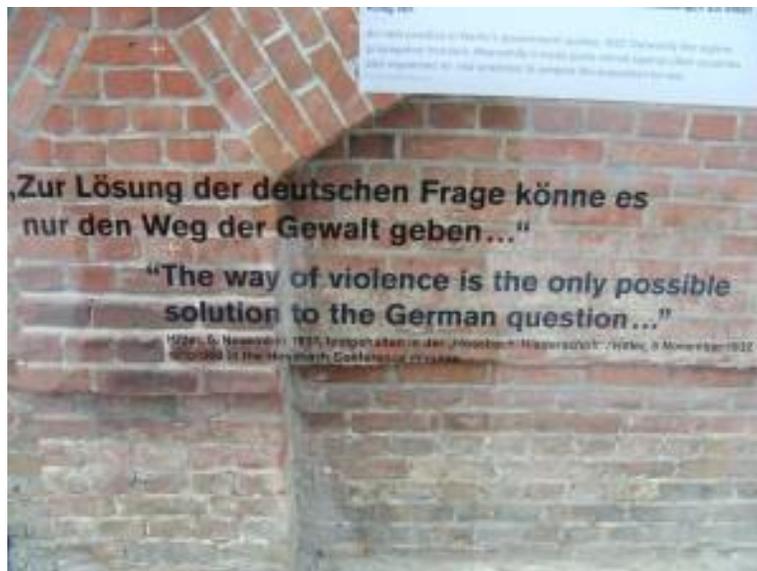
Inside The Memorial to the Murdered Jews

I wasn't sure what to think when I arrived at The Memorial to the Murdered Jews. It's an array of 2711 concrete blocks, each a different size, and resting on an undulating surface. They're arranged in no particular order on a site near the Brandenburger Tor—the very heart of the city. The memorial seems simple enough at first, but as you move deeper into the center of the space, the blocks climb higher and higher until they rise above you. It's easy to get disoriented and lose your bearing inside. By the end of my time there, I sensed how the entire area itself was devoid of life, a reminder of such a tragic loss—of what can never be—a barren landscape in the heart of the city where nothing will ever bloom.



A view of the Jewish Memorial looking south toward the Tiergarten

A few blocks away, on the ruins of the former Gestapo Headquarters, lies The Topography of Terror, a museum depicting the atrocities that were planned and perpetrated by the SS from 1933-1945. The exhibit begins with a wall-sized photograph of the decimated cityscape of Berlin in 1945. From there, it depicts the methodical efforts of the SS as they rolled across all of Europe, east and west, killing anyone who opposed them. Outside, next to the only foundation wall to survive, is an exhibit depicting how the Nazi's worked to harness the anger and frustration of a proud nation in desperate times.



From the Topography of Terror Exhibit

Far from depicting the German people as victims of Fascist extremism, the words and photographs tell a story of a society all too willing to target scapegoats— immigrants, Jews, homosexuals, and socialists—anyone to blame for the problems plaguing a nation in desperate times.

I met an old friend of mine out for drinks one night—Shane, an American expat pilot from my Air Force days, living in the city and flying for a German airline. We were walking down a cobblestone sidewalk on our way to a pub and at one point, he put his arm out to stop me. He pointed to the ground where some metal squares had been inserted in the cobblestone. I bent down and realized that names were etched on each of the squares. “The people who used to live in this building,” he said. “The ones who died in the camps.” I stared at the names and then at the building. “It’s something they’re doing across the city—a way of constantly reminding people of what happened.”



It would be easy to get consumed with Berlin's tragic, lost Century, but there is much more to this great city. I took my time to explore the new sections that had emerged in the last few decades. The bustle of activity, thriving shopping centers, the architectural blending of old and new, coupled with a quiet, cosmopolitan rumble of life in the city was energizing and inspiring. Over dinner at a Thai restaurant, Shane talked about how Berlin had become one of the most progressive and interesting cities in Europe with an international flair on par with Paris or London. As I experienced the energy and vitality of the city, it was hard to disagree.



Reichstag (German Parliament Building) with its new glass dome

On my second-to-last day, I visited the Reichstag with its magnificent glass dome. I climbed the spiraling ramp to gaze out upon an unobstructed view of the city. The dome was built with an elaborate series of mirrors and glass windows rising up through its center to literally shed light on the legislative chambers below. It is an inspiring piece of architecture, meant to represent transparency in government. The circular area inside the base of the dome details the storied history of the Reichstag, including the infamous fire in 1933 which led to the suspension of civil liberties and seizure of power by the Nazis.

By the end of my trip, I began to understand that the citizens of Berlin, past and present, have chosen to embrace the city's role as a crucible of memory—the repository of everything that war, in all its horrific manifestations, inflicted on their citizens, the nation and the world. They're not afraid to confront the legacy of a war that took the lives of one in nine Germans. It's as if the city wants the memory of the suffering and devastation to be embraced—for their experiences to be shared and understood by those fortunate enough to have been untouched by war. They can't imagine Berlin outside of the context of its past, and they don't want the rest of the world to do so, either.

But, there's much more to it than that. Whether conscious or not, I became aware of something even more powerful—the *absence* of division. The city has become whole, endeavoring to erase the dividing lines between people and places, East and West, Germans and immigrants in a way that seems new to me in this country. It's as if the very fabric of the city has evolved to become an example of what is possible in this new century—an impressive endeavor, indeed.

By the time I left Berlin, it was clear to me, that if there is any place that can offer itself up as an experiment and beacon to hope and progress—a city to shed light on the ever-present struggle between imagination and fear—then Berlin is that city. After all, that may be the struggle we face in the century before us. Maybe John F. Kennedy said it best in 1963, “All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin.” It’s been twenty-one years since the Berlin Wall fell. May we all continue to support the dreams and aspirations of a city that can lead us onward—a city that has suffered and learned the price of division. May we all learn from their example and carry it with us into tomorrow.

Until next time,

J.A. Moad II

