

Berlin, Intersecting Traumas

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“Spazieren... Go spazieren! (Go for a stroll)”

— Peter Falk, *Wings of Desire*

CREATED OUT OF MILITARY VICTORIES INTO THE CAPITAL of the first German nation-state in 1871, Berlin grew exponentially during the next few decades. Most of its older architectural structures gave way for new buildings. The pre-World War I city on the river Spree was a constantly changing urban center in danger of losing its past for a newly erected, curated, and triumphant array of monuments, victory columns, and museums. These cast imperial Berlin as the inheritor of Rome, Athens, and the culmination of centuries of strife toward a seat at the world table. From the traumatizing First World War, Berlin emerged physically unscathed as the new capital of the unwanted and celebrated, dangerous yet alluring Weimar Republic which offered both promise and doom. Weimar’s eventual demise turned Berlin into the center of the Third Reich’s racial and colonial wars. Then, leveled by Allied air raids and the Soviets’ liberation, the city became divided and, as President John F. Kennedy identified it, the frontline of the Cold War, until 1989 when the wall came down and the city became once again the capital of a newly united Germany.

Today, the city lives and thrives in the aftermath of these national traumas. Amongst the Google Arts and Culture Tours of Berlin, travelers are guided through an exploration of the “Tragic History of the Twentieth Century.” The route is a tour de force of the sites of war and genocide that pepper Germany’s nostalgic and vibrant, eccentric and commercialized, contemporary culture of its capital.



Figure 1
Book Burning Memorial, Bebelplatz.

Figure 2
Soviet War Memorial, Tiergarten.

All photos by Cricket Vauthier Roemer.

In his 1930s Parisian exile, the German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin had already feared that the past always would belong to the victors. Certainly, changing victors have shaped Berlin's landscape. Streets, parks, monuments, and memorials recall earlier nationalist, colonialist, imperialist, and racist dreams. Boulevards, surrounding monuments of past generals and political leaders, and above all, the 1873 Victory Column with its intricate battle relief, review and revisit the paths that led to the German nation-state. But an urban landscape is not an open, nor necessarily a straightforward book.

Drawing roughly a circle around the Humboldt University, founded in 1811 by Wilhelm von Humboldt to foster free academic research and nationalism, the urban space marked by the extension of the intersection of Friedrichstrasse and Unter den Linden is comprised of varied and contradictory historical memories. The university, historic for promoting a new ideal of learning, also offers a memorial to the book burning of 1933 in the middle of the public square Bebelplatz. The empty bookshelves, under a glass plate set into the cobbles in plain white, recall Nazi ideology that sought to empty the shelves and replace the often intertwining and overlapping German cultures with a new homogeneous and sterilized racial culture (Figure 1).

Exploring the city on foot, urban strollers are not walking along a linear narrative, but rather fragments that make different histories and stories. Walking confers, revokes and invests new meaning upon the urban architecture. Centrally located Tiergarten Park features numerous reminders of the unfulfilled dreams of the Third Reich. Nazi architect Albert Speer, together with Adolf Hitler, sought to transform Berlin into Germania, a racially cleansed empire and center of the Third Reich. In contrast, a master-planned and only partially executed Soviet memorial now occupies the central point of Hitler and Speer's east-west axis of their would-be architectural designs of Berlin as Germania. The memorial recalls the loss of Soviet soldiers that captured Berlin. The marble and stonework of the memorial were taken from Hitler's destroyed Reich Chancellery. Dedicated in the 1940s, the memorial was situated amid the ruins of a destroyed Tiergarten that Berliners had stripped of its timber for firewood in the interim. During the Cold War, they renamed the western continuation of Unter den Linden, Strasse des 17. Juni (June 17th Street), to commemorate the Soviets' violent crushing of the workers' uprising in East Berlin on that date in 1953 (Figure 2).

Berlin's landscape does not seem to offer a realm to casually explore along Peter Falk's memories of his grandmother's *Spazierengehen*. To stroll recalls a curious and delightful encounter with cities. But as Benjamin realized all too well, the very possibility of the socially privileged male *flâneur* without responsibility or goal had already become impossible by the commercialization and mass politics in the streets of the 1930s. The Tiergarten is not only a montage of past victories, conquests, defeats, violence and atrocity, but also one of alternative memories.



Figure 3 Memorial to the Sinti and Roma Victims of National Socialism, Tiergarten.

Figure 4 Memorial to Homosexuals Persecuted Under National Socialism, Tiergarten.



Figure 5 (opposite) Topography of Terror, Niederkirchnerstrasse.

Today, Tiergarten is one of the most popular city parks, with extensive woodlands, and is home to various restored monuments of German writers and composers like J.W. Goethe and Richard Wagner, but also includes the memorials of LGBTQIA, Sinti and Roma victims of the Third Reich in front of the German parliament (Figures 3 and 4).

No new victor ever entirely supplanted Berlin with a new vision. Even communist East Berlin only partly replaced imperial structures with the dreary hopelessness of socialist architecture. Past victories and losses, triumphs and traumas, most often overlap in the memorials and urban landscape. The Speer-designed Third Reich Air Ministry no longer recalls Hitler's fascist goals of conquest. Goering's Air Ministry no longer is decorated by a Nazi relief of chiseled soldiers. The Soviets erased them. Instead, the building has a large mural of the Soviet proletariat barely completed before the uprising of 1953, and now in contrast, the space in front of the mural commemorates the victims of Soviet soldiers and tanks. Similarly, adjacent to the Topography of Terror, which houses a museum and memorial consisting of the few physical remains of the dugout basement of the former Gestapo headquarters, the former Reich Air Ministry looms large behind, with its fascist architecture standing in contrast to the rubble of the memorial and a remnant of the Berlin wall running in between (Figure 5).

Berlin's realms of memory are not linear. They exist in curious juxtapositions, at odds with each other rather than in harmony. The Brandenburg Gate, all that remains of the former defensive structures dating from the pre-Napoleonic period, is located at Pariser Platz,



which housed the French and American embassies, the Hotel Adlon and the Palais Lieberman, until the 1940's. Today the American embassy has been rebuilt and the formerly lavish Lieberman Palais has been reconstructed, critically reworking its original classicist design and now housing alternating exhibitions. A *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stone) in front of it recalls the death of the German Jewish artist Max Liebermann's wife, Martha, in 1943. This one, and hundreds of others, dot the Berlin and larger German landscape, each one commemorating in a brass plate the name and date of a victim of Nazi persecution.

The preponderance of overlapping historical markers of the city is not new. Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire* (1987) narrates the visible and invisible coexistences of different layers of time. Different pasts and presents intertwine in the celebrated movie. The camera focuses on sites of emptiness and destruction. It is the city's violent past, which forms absences and voids in the movie, that continuously challenges the present. The past thus is both constantly present and yet elusive, and fragmentary. Even the angels in the movie who record timeless memories are unable to forge narratives to impart meaning to the varied moments of the past. At the same time the protagonists seek history. The ability to have a past is directly linked to the health and happiness of individuals in the movie: The character of the trapeze artist Marion explicitly makes the connection between happiness and having a story: "I am happy. I have a history. And I will continue to have one."

Walking under the Brandenburg Gate which East Berliners poured through on November 9, 1989 when the wall came down, visitors face the victory column that still celebrates the creation of the first German nation-state in 1871. The gate, probably Germany's most recognizable monument, is also flanked by the stark, expansive Memorial to the Murdered Jews, the monument to the Gays and Lesbians, and the memorial dedicated to the Sinti and Roma. The geographical proximity prescribes a context for the national monuments. Leaving the central historical monument behind, walking through Berlin offers endless numbers of chance encounters with the layers of the city's varied pasts. Not far from the Brandenburg Gate, urban strollers and residents recognize an elevated outline of the profile of Georg Elser, a carpenter and resistance fighter, that is illuminated at night. In the pavement of the intersection are famous quotes by Elser, who attempted to assassinate Hitler in November 1939. Elser was ultimately killed in Dachau in April 1944. The 17-meter-high silhouette stands amid apartment houses and on the former site of Hitler's Reich Chancellery, the very embodiment of the Nazi vision of power and totalitarian dictatorship. Largely destroyed by the Soviets in 1945 and 1949 in addition to the East German government in 1959,

Figure 6
Georg Elser memorial, Wilhelmstrasse.





Figure 7
Jewish Museum, Lindenstrasse.

Figure 8 (opposite)
Menashe Kadishman, *Shalechet (Fallen Leaves)*, installation at the Jewish Museum.

the Chancellery, once 400 meters long and 20 meters high, included Hitler's bunker where he committed suicide. None of this exists any longer, and the unremarkable residential apartment houses distract from a palpable yet invisible and absent past (Figure 6).

Absences feature prominently in Daniel Libeskind's spectacularly arresting architecture, in the tormented and twisted zig-zag structures of the Jewish Museum. The "Memory Void" is one of the most symbolic spaces on the grounds of Libeskind's building, in which an installation titled *shalechet (Fallen Leaves)* by Menashe Kadishman covers the grounds with over ten thousand faces with open mouths, cut from heavy round iron plates. The individual visitor, walking across them, generates disconcerting echoes eerily reminiscent of the metallic sounds of trains over tracks (Figures 7 and 8).

Much like the Libeskind spaces, Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, located between Berlin's Brandenburg Gate and Potsdamer Platz and constructed of concrete slabs, does not impart a structured narrative lesson upon visitors. Instead, it requires visitors to find their own way through the slabs and the past and its memories (Figure 9).

In his Lessing Prize speech in 1965, the German Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany Peter Weiss argued that it is witnessing that allows for the representation of past traumas and anguish. In his



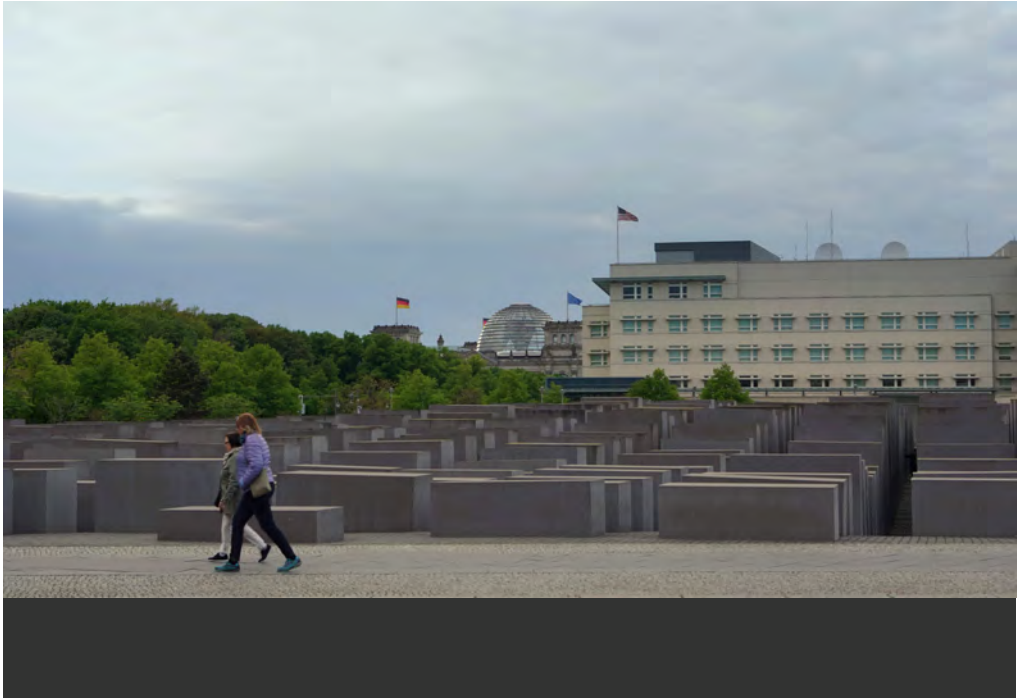


Figure 9
Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Cora-Berliner-Strasse.

acceptance lecture, Weiss reflected on the Enlightenment Berlin philosopher, Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, and his ideas about the differences between literary “temporal” arts such as music, poetry, and dance and the pictorial “spatial” arts such as painting, sculpture, and architecture. For Weiss, Lessing’s discussion of the famous sculpture of the Trojan priest Laocoön and his sons allowed him to reflect on the question of the representation of pain and testimony.

This iconic sculpture of human agony had been excavated in 1506 in Rome. To punish Laocoön for his attempt to warn of the Trojan horse, the gods’ giant serpent killed him and his sons. For Lessing, depicting the physical suffering would have been too painful and instead the pain is contained in the static beauty of the sculpture. Going beyond Lessing, Weiss associates the static condition even more poignantly with death and aphasia: “Laocoön’s mouth, and the mouth of the youngest son are half open, not in a final scream but in final exertion before wearing down. They have given up their voices...they form nothing but a monument of their own demise. Never again will they make a sound.”

The inability to speak validates Lessing’s contention of the static quality of statues, but going beyond Lessing’s dichotomy of the spatial and temporal arts, Weiss regains grounds for testimony and memory through the oldest son, for him and by extension, for the

viewer of the sculpture. Unlike the father and the youngest son who are figures of despair and defeat in their frightful demise, the oldest is witnessing and will speak, extending the static nature of the sculpture beyond its time frame.

The 21st-century explorers of Berlin are not unlike Laocoön's oldest son. Their walks through Berlin give voice to the violence of the past. Berlin's histories are written as one traverses the city's landscape. The routes connect the national, imperial, racial and political fantasies that erupted in unprecedented violence and atrocity. Today's Berlin is the inheritor of the past but one without a triumph. The past remains in constant flux not unlike Libeskind's voids with their stereoscopes that produce constantly changing sounds and light spaces (Figure 10).

Only a shell of the facade of the historical Anhalter Bahnhof remains of this train station from which mostly elderly Jewish citizens were deported. Today, it is a social space, a park where children and families congregate. The train tracks are covered by a soccer field named after the German Jewish athlete Lilli Henoch, who set four world records and won 10 German national championships. Lilli was dismissed from her club, and eventually killed by the Nazis (Figure 11).

The intersection of Rudi Dutschke and Axel Springer recalls the confrontation between the rebellious student generation of the 1960s and the media. The murder of Dutschke, a charismatic student leader, resulted in students attacking the headquarters of Springer

Figure 10
Jewish Museum, Lindenstrasse.





Figure 11
Anhalter Bahnhof, Kreuzberg.

Figure 12
Grosse Hamburger Strasse 29-30, façade
with bullet holes from World War II.





Figure 13
Former East German border guard tower, Kieler Strasse, now a memorial for Günter Litfin, the first person killed while attempting to flee East Berlin after the building of the Berlin Wall.

publishing houses. They accused the tabloid Bild for incitement and held Springer responsible for the death of what now became the generation's martyr. From there, moving northward there is not only Checkpoint Charlie and other markers of the former wall but also eventually the newly rebuilt famous Oranienburger Strasse synagogue, and a house on Grosse Hamburger Strasse 29-30 from where many Jews were deported, its facade riddled with bullet holes from World War II (Figure 12).

Venturing west of Friedrichstrasse, one finds reminders of the guard towers in the middle of a recently created residential area. Friedrichstrasse itself, the train station, where crossing from East and West were possible, came to be known as the *Tränenpalast* ("Palace of Tears") of saddened goodbyes (Figure 13).

The streets, parks, and buildings recall many painful memories and hopes, dreams and despairs of a ruptured past that the city inherited but has not normalized into a new linear story. Despair and hope grate at each and with the future representing not simply an extension of the past, Berlin continues to remind us of hope to be heroes for no less, as illustrated in David Bowie's iconic Berlin song, "Heroes," but also only to "be heroes, just for one day" in giving voice to its painful memories. But that perhaps, is all it takes. A