Introduction

People, Place, Identity

Berlin is one of the world's most vibrant and interesting cities. Now capital of the Federal Republic of Germany, and playing a leading role in Europe and the wider world, Berlin has risen from insignificant origins in two small medieval trading centres on swampy soil at the confluence of two rivers, the Spree and the Havel, in the Brandenburg marches (or Mark) in the centre of Europe. Facing both west and east – with bitter winter winds blowing from the Urals, and hot continental summers to be enjoyed at its many lakesides and woodlands – Berlin has always been something of a frontier settlement.

Periodically undergoing radical changes of regime, it is also a highly self-reflexive city. Berlin today is not merely a centre of political power and social experimentation, but also in effect a historical kaleidoscope, selectively reflecting changing facets of an ever-present past. Traces of quite different periods are discernible – whether Prussian militarism and enlightenment, industrialisation and imperialism, experiments with democracy, or repressive dictatorships of both right and left. Statues have been erected and demolished, plaques and memorials displayed and displaced, and streets named and renamed, in recurrent cycles of repression or resurrection of heroes and remembrance of victims. Berlin is, and has long been, a wilfully self-conscious city, ever debating its continually contested past.

What then can we select as 'ten moments that shaped Berlin'? The meaning and length of a 'moment' can vary immensely, from a matter of minutes to an epoch. Whether brief

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or extended, moments are always in some way significant: they are discrete, distinct from what came before and what followed. Yet they also form part of a wider entity, contributing to its development and transformation. Here, I treat the notion of moment in the broadest sense: a distinctive period which might persist over years, decades, or centuries. Each chapter addresses a longer moment, a defining period of significant transformation in the character and shape of Berlin; but at the start of each chapter I have added brief vignettes that may serve to illustrate, symbolise, or crystallise specific issues within the wider moment.

What are the selection criteria for defining historical periods? At first glance, it might appear that political regimes and particularly wars were most significant in shaping Berlin. But these were not anonymous forces outside of history: decisions were made by significant individuals, social actors, and organisations, in the context of changing power constellations, and informed by cultural assumptions and ambitions. Moreover, there are distinctive longer-term patterns. Key social and economic changes affected who were 'Berliners' – and indeed how many people were what sort of Berliners – as well as the conditions in which they lived. And cultural shifts informed the ways in which people conceived of 'Berlin', past and present, as well as their conflicting aspirations for the future. While choosing distinct periods largely according to significant changes of regime, this book therefore revolves around three interrelated elements that are integral to underlying continuities as well as radical change: people, place, and constructions of identity.

First of all, the people. Those we may like to think of as an enduring collective identity, 'Berliners', were repeatedly constituted and continually reshaped by changing social and economic structures and cultural conceptions. Throughout its history, Berlin's population has been marked by diversity. For centuries,

indeed from its earliest traceable origins, Berlin has expanded from two original small settlements on the River Spree, Berlin and Cölln, through waves of in-migration from elsewhere. Many people came in the hope of making a better future for themselves; and periodically, minorities who were perceived as economically useful were actively encouraged to immigrate, contributing significantly to the religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the city. Such communities range from the Dutch in the medieval period, when the German Ascanians suppressed the pagan Slavs and brought in agricultural expertise from the Netherlands, or the Rhineland colonisers who may have given Cölln its name, through the Huguenots, Jews, and Bohemians of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, workers from the provinces came seeking better economic prospects in the rapidly expanding industrial city, eastern European Jews fled pogroms in the Russian borderlands, and White Russians sought to escape the Bolshevik revolution, while the supposed attractions or greater freedoms of city life played a major role for other immigrants. By the later twentieth century, the foreign forced labourers of the Nazi era were replaced by Turkish 'guest workers' (Gastarbeiter) in the west, and international workers from socialist countries in the east. Over the centuries there were changing patterns of immigration and degrees of integration; 'Berliners' were never an ethnically or culturally homogeneous community, even if certain communities were variously privileged or marginalised at different times, and frequently subjected to severe restrictions.

In this long history of diversity, the Nazi era presented a striking contrast. Berliners of Jewish descent, and Roma and Sinti ('gypsies'), were variously forced to emigrate, or were deported and murdered; people with physical and mental disabilities were killed; and others who did not fit in with Nazi ideals,

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such as gay men, were brutally persecuted, often with fatal consequences. During the war, foreign forced labourers were brought in to work, replacing men at the front. Post-war Berlin had a very different social profile from just a couple of decades earlier. But in the early twenty-first century, Berlin reverted to long-standing traditions, officially welcoming refugees from war-torn regions and informally attracting incomers from around the world.

Being a Berliner has often been as much a matter of choice as of descent. The notion of being a 'Berliner by choice' (*Wahlberliner*) has a long history, claimed even for incomers to East Berlin in the 1950s, while others were trying to escape at least the communist half of the city.[1] Yet alongside continuing diversity, there has also long been a sense of a distinctive Berlin identity, of what it means 'to be a Berliner'.

Constructions of this essence vary. US President John F. Kennedy famously implied, in his 1963 speech from Schöneberg Town Hall in West Berlin, that anyone committed to western notions of freedom and democracy must stand in solidarity with the population of this walled-in outpost, and could in this sense claim, as he did himself, to be a Berliner. Others have sought to identify supposedly defining characteristics of Berliners, highlighting their legendary sharp humour and 'cheekiness' (the *Berliner Schnauze*), which was ambivalently combined – at least according to the nineteenth-century novelist Theodor Fontane – with warm-heartedness and a tendency to irony and self-deprecation.[2] The art historian Karl Scheffler pointed to the wit, self-irony, and lack of sentimentality of ordinary Berliners.[3] Features such as quick-wittedness and intellectual curiosity could challenge class distinctions; and newcomers could rapidly adapt to the abrasive manners of Berliners, developing a capacity for directness and assertive repartee as an essential survival tactic.

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Incomers might however have more trouble acquiring the distinctive Berlin accent or speech patterns. Since the eighteenth century, upper-class Berlinese has incorporated a smattering of French words, but ordinary people widely indulged in distinctive local pronunciation: for example, a 'j' or 'y' sound replacing 'g', such that words like 'good' (*gut*) would be pronounced more like 'yoot' (*jut*); a hard 'ck' replacing the softer 'ch', such that 'ich' (I) would become 'ick'; or a 't' replacing 's' in words like 'das' ('the' or 'that'), which would become 'det'. Berliners often enjoy speaking *Berlinerisch* even when in perfect command of High German, or use it with affectionate humour and delight as a mark of common collective identity – suggesting that Heinrich Heine had perhaps overstated it when, in the early nineteenth century, he claimed that 'no city has less by way of local patriotism than Berlin'.[4]

Secondly, people and place need to be considered together. Not only the population but also the key sites and size of Berlin, and its relations with the wider world, were closely interrelated. Integral moments in Berlin's history are defined by changing functions – fishing village, trading centre, princely residence, garrison town, sequentially capital of radically different modern states, eventually divided pawn and then ambiguous heart of Europe. Distinctive too is its pattern of expansion, not only through urbanisation with industrialisation, but also as a conglomerate of separate localities. Many districts of today's Berlin were formerly townships in their own right, with their own castles or palaces, town halls, and idiosyncratic local history museums (*Heimatmuseen*), as in the charming old building in Köpenick or the medieval citadel in Spandau (Figure 0.1). Even in its origins, Berlin was formed by conjoining two separate settlements, Berlin and Cölln; this pattern of amalgamation continued, most notably with the incorporation of surrounding areas into the metropolis of Greater Berlin (*Groß-Berlin*) in 1920. And

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Figure 0.1 Medieval fortress and tower of Spandau
In medieval times, Spandau was an independent fortified town
that was far more important than Berlin.
Photograph by the author

class differences between districts were already marked well before
the Cold War division between communist East and capitalist
West fostered further striking contrasts.

Thirdly, and deeply significant for Berlin, are the multi-
layered traces and ubiquitous representations of historical devel-
opments. From the earliest days to the present, a self-reflexive
engagement with aspects of Berlin's past has been key to changing
aspirations for the future. Representations of heroes and villains,
from Albert the Bear or Frederick the Great to Adolf Hitler,
contrast with remembrance of martyrs and victims, whether
'fallen soldiers' in war or groups persecuted under National
Socialism. What is truly unique about Berlin is buried in the

parts of this sentence referring to villains and victims; while communities everywhere memorialise heroes and martyrs, no other city displays, to such an extent, such visible remorse and responsibility for the legacies of its villains, or engages in comparable degrees of remembrance of the victims of its own former misdeeds. Moreover, much of this activity is in some way a recuperation, a re-valuing and an attempt to return to Berlin what has been lost.

These aspects too cannot be separated from people and place; descendants of the persecuted often return, for example, to explore landscapes inhabited by their forebears, trying to reconstruct lives before destruction; or they settle and attempt, in some way, not so much to 'make good again' (as in the wholly inappropriate German word for compensation, *Wiedergutmachung*, in principle utterly impossible after the Shoah or Holocaust) as to pick up strands of lives that were not lived and to create a new strand in their own lives that allows a sense of reconnection with the truncated or displaced lives of ousted ancestors.

But there is so much more to Berlin's past than the dozen years of Nazi rule, overwhelming though this was in its shattering impact and lasting legacies. Reflections on historical layers of identity have long preoccupied observers and residents of this fascinating city, well before Hitler took it over and nearly destroyed it. Over the last few centuries, innumerable residents, visitors, diary and memoir writers, journalists, scholars, and creative writers have made variously lengthy or pithy contributions to the project of distilling and conveying the ever-changing character of Berlin, even before we get anywhere near the preoccupations with Nazism, the Cold War, and contemporary issues that have dominated engagement with Berlin's history and identity since the mid twentieth

century.[5] Visual representations of Berlin's complex history abound: reproductions of Heinrich Zille's cartoons and photographs of Berlin working-class life more than a century ago adorn the walls of some underground stations; cinematic classics from the Weimar era, including Walter Ruttman's *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (1927) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, or novels by Alfred Döblin, Hans Fallada, and Christopher Isherwood, variously inform current popular perceptions of Weimar and Nazi Berlin; spy thrillers, detective fiction, and popular films play on fascination with deception and subterfuge both under Nazism and in a divided city at the flashpoint of the Cold War, while others portray the East German secret police, the Stasi, or the transgenerational legacies of Holocaust persecution. Many recent films and novels, interestingly, explore the experiences of immigrants and refugees as well as the darker sides of life in the city.

Meanwhile, tourism – so essential to modern Berlin's economy – has not merely highlighted its dark past, but also plays on reconstructing some supposed 'essence of Berlin', whether symbolised by the ubiquitous and now remarkably benign representations of the 'Berlin bear' emblem and the Brandenburg Gate, or portrayed in re-imaginings of Imperial Berlin or the 'golden twenties'. All these portrayals are selective reconstructions, and always contested, from a wide variety of perspectives. This concern with self-representation and reflection is, too, of the essence of Berlin.

In what follows, I have sought both to present an outline (necessarily sketchy) of key moments in Berlin's history, and a flavour of some of the ways in which the people, the places, and conceptions of identity, have evolved and shifted over time.