

Second chance in Berlin

What makes a city great? According to Josef Joffe, the leading German commentator, it needs hungry outsiders struggling to become insiders. This explains why Berlin will never again be a great city, even when it becomes the capital of the united Germany in 1999

FIRST IT WAS the "Fourth Reich," the spectre of Germany *rediviva*, which haunted the western mind. But the ghosts failed to materialise. Reunited Germany, its cold war fetters gone, was again number one in Europe, but it insisted on being normal and boring. Yes, there were those neo-Nazi punks, as nasty as can be. But at no point did the good burghers of the Bundesrepublik risk losing control, even as unemployment climbed to 1932 levels. If the "New Germans" did flex their muscles, they did so—oddly—in favour of *more* integration and Europe-minded virtue. Their lode star was Brussels, not Königsberg. Instead of singing *Deutschmark über alles*, they trooped off to Maastricht.

Now, almost a decade later, it is "Berlin" which mesmerises the mind: the city about to star as Germany's capital once more. What will it be? The divines are ambivalent. On the up side there beckons a glorious past of exploding achievement: Berlin's Golden Age was bracketed by the birth of the Bismarck Empire in 1871 and the rise of Hitler in 1933. We are drawn to Isherwood and Spender, to *Cabaret* and *The Blue Angel*. This is the city where Lang,

THE NEW BERLIN WILL BE NEITHER A DREAM NOR A NIGHTMARE

Pabst and Sternberg wrote the first chapter of the cinematographic canon which gave us *Dr. Caligari*, *M* and *Metropolis*, plus Josephine Baker, Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. Listen to Furtwängler, Klemperer and Schoenberg. Look at Dix, Beckmann and Grosz. Watch Brecht and Weill collaborate on the *Threepenny Opera*. Walk through the Bauhaus past Gropius and Van der Rohe. In literature we recall Mann, Hauptmann, Zweig, Döglin and Zuckmayer. Physics was reconstructed in Berlin by Einstein and Planck. Koch and Röntgen pushed at the frontiers of medicine: Weber and Simmel at those of sociology. Bleichröder and Rathenau stand for an economy that came to overshadow Europe's.

Might we soon watch a remake in a Berlin no longer divided by the wall, in a city once more the

largest (geographically) in Europe? Physically, for sure, Berlin is re-experiencing the dynamic of the *Gründerjahre* in the late 19th century. Go to the Potsdamer Platz, a mined no-man's-land during the cold war, now the largest construction site in the world, where cranes and builders toil through the night. Walk into the former East, where grand hotels and gentrification are erasing the last traces of Prusso-Marxism. It is the 1890s brought forward to the threshold of the new millennium.

Now to the downside. The 1890s was also the decade when Germany's and Europe's troubles began in earnest. Berlin was the high-torque engine inside the power house that was Germany. This is where Wilhelm II, a man of modest talent, prodigious insecurity and back-breaking ambition, concocted Germany's first scheme for the domination of Europe; it was replicated by Hitler 40 years later.

Will the Berlin Republic, bursting through the modest dimensions of its Bonn predecessor, reach for hegemony again? Is not geography destiny? After all, Germany's centre of gravity is shifting 400 miles to the east—from the Rhine to within 50 miles of the Polish border. Under this scenario, the Berlin Republic will forsake its western past, thrusting into the geostrategic vacuum between Oder and Bug. Not with panzers and jackboots, mind you, but with investments, trade and diplomacy. Will not this drive be much more successful precisely because cell-phones have replaced the tanks, and brogues the hobnails? How could the Germans resist the allure, given that, this time, the Poles, Czechs, Ukrainians and even Russians *want* what Berlin has to offer: *richesse*, efficiency, a socio-political model which fits their statist past more comfortably than does the freewheeling capitalism of the US.

Those who waver between the dream and the nightmare will not find answers in Alexandra Richie's *Faust's Metropolis: A History of Berlin* (HarperCollins, 1998). Histories do not foretell the future. Readers will find, however, 1,107 pages of none-too-large print—including 200 pages of footnotes. They will also find a history of Berlin wrapped up in a deftly retold *vita* of Germany from Tacitus to Kohl. Navigating

an ocean of facts (and earlier accounts) with panache. Richie has done a marvellous job of integration.

Her work is strong on culture and intellectual history; a bit weak on economics, which might have deserved more attention in a chronicle charting the rise of a Prussian backwater to global pre-eminence (and down again). Nitpickers may also fault her (or her editor) for misplaced unlauts or the occasional misreading of events. None the less, for all its breathtaking ambition, this book is a joy to read. Richie tells the story with a fine sense of drama; and as an outsider looking in, she mercifully avoids two traps. She never gets bogged down in minutiae, as a German historian might, and she coolly resists the seduction of fantasy and sentimentality which Berlin has generated aplenty. Her central dictum gets it just right: "Berlin is a city of myth, of legend, and of the deliberate manipulation of history."

This leitmotif presents the reader with a sturdy lookout whence to peer into a future which is almost now, as the government prepares to move to Berlin in 1999. What will it be—a remake of the dream or the nightmare? The answer is neither—at least not soon.

Will it be the Golden Age, Mark II? Let's not hold our breath. Berlin, it is worth recalling, was *never* like London, Paris or Madrid (under Spanish Habsburgs). These capitals became coterminous with Britain, France and Spain, as ambitious potentates struck out to subjugate an ever-expanding realm. These cities were the centres not just of empires, but of centralised states which have existed for half a millennium. But Berlin was allowed to play that role for only 74 years—from 1871 to 1945.

Before there was Berlin there was "Germany," an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of kingdoms, duchies and "free cities." The political centre was peripatetic, as the early Kaisers moved around between Aachen, Augsburg and Regensburg. The "Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation" was dominated for centuries by Vienna. Economic power was variously centred in Nuremberg, Cologne, Frankfurt and the Hanseatic towns. Heidelberg, Greifswald and Tübingen boasted great schools long before Berlin's Humboldt University opened its doors in 1810.

Berlin *rediviva* can't simply take it all back. The Deutsche Bank won't move from Frankfurt, nor will BV/Hypo move from Munich. Siemens, originally founded in Berlin, will also stay in Munich, as will the aerospace and arms industries. Daimler's production facilities will remain in Stuttgart (and Detroit). Publishing will not soon forsake Hamburg and Munich, nor will the art market abscond from Cologne. The point is that Berlin was only briefly like London and Paris; 40 years of economic decay cannot be reversed at the snap of a Bundestag vote.

What makes a city great? It is a mysterious cocktail. Political power? If so, Washington, Canberra, Ottawa and Bern would be great cities. Economic and demographic clout? Closer, but not close enough: Detroit and Chicago are big cities with an impressive economic base; but Chicago has always been the "Second City." Intellectual clout? Boston, Massachusetts, boasts the world's finest universities, but is still a dowdy cousin to New York and Los Angeles.

How, then, could Berlin's Golden Age be re-enacted?

Berlin's Golden Age: Postdamer Platz at the turn of the century



ted? Moving some 35,000 federal employees from the Rhine to the Spree will add, well, 35,000 civil servants: these, as Ottawa *et al* teach us, do not inject greatness into a city. There must be more—more of the ingredients which made New York and Los Angeles not just American, but global hubs. It is the same stuff that turned Berlin into an avatar of urban grandeur after 1871. Exponential population growth swept away ancient barriers to change. (Berlin grew from 800,000 in 1871 to over 2m just before the first world war.) What triggers such a dynamic? Rapid economic expansion that ham-

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mers the old ways even harder. Coming later and faster than in Britain, the industrial revolution hit Germany with a vengeance—and nowhere more fiercely than in Berlin. Not stuck in its mediaeval ways, the city could practically start from scratch and it had plenty of room to stretch. Naturally, awakening giants generate an insatiable demand for talent, toil and ambition—which came, as if tailor-made, from the east, as far away as St Petersburg.

Berlin's greatness, like New York's and LA's, cannot be separated from immigration. By 1912, one fifth of Berliners were immigrants. A chronicler of the period wrote: "No one in the ranks of honour was born in Berlin. They came from Poland, Hungary, Silesia, Moravia, Galicia and Ukraine, but also from Baden and Bavaria, Riga and Magdeburg." Many of them were Jewish. Numbering 50,000 in 1871, the Jewish community would grow to almost 200,000 in the early 20th century. Indeed, for all its anti-Semitism and "Junkerism," Berlin in the late 19th century was what New York would become only in the early 20th; where a Galician Jew could leap from peddler's son to professor in the space of one generation.

Hungry outsiders struggling to become insiders make cities great—those who must work harder, who must think new thoughts and hack new paths to wrest acceptance from those ensconced in inherited status or traditional occupations. Isn't that the unending story of New York and LA? Yet where is a similar catalyst to drive the Berlin sequel?

Germany regards immigration as a threat, not as a boon. Indeed, you cannot emigrate to Germany as you can to the US or Australia. If, hailing from Romania or Russia, you can prove "Germanitude," you are in. Or as the joke goes, it is better to have a German shepherd in your ancestry than a PhD in German literature. You can ask for asylum and cross your fingers that the courts will concur. You can get a temporary stay as "guest worker." And you can slip in illegally, eking out a living on the black market while hoping to snatch citizenship through marriage.

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None the less, Berlin already has the largest foreign population in Germany—although mainly Turkish *Gastarbeiter*, who hesitate to set foot on the ladder of upward mobility. How can their children—or the Russian Jews or the Vietnamese cigarette contrabandists—rewrite Berlin's stirring success story? It takes more than ambitious newcomers; in order to flourish, they need a permissive environment. Yet Germany is one of the most heavily regulated societies in the west. You want to keep your store open longer than your German competitor? Both of you have to close no later than 8:00pm—and stay shut on Sundays. You want to offer your labour at a lower price than mandated by law and union rules? You can—but only in the "shadow economy." You want to start a new company? Then brace yourself for battle against restrictive zoning codes, environmental no-no's and tight-fisted licensing procedures. Simply to move from Leipzig to Berlin is gruelling, given rigid housing markets which penalise new entrants.

Compared to that, Wilhelmine Berlin, for all its dour Prussianism, was an economic free-for-all. The new Berlin will have to struggle hard against 40 years of economic decline (both softened and accelerated by billions in federal subsidies), plus a pathological demography. Until the wall came down, the productive young departed for the west, leaving behind the non-working old and the draft-dodgers and drop-outs from West Germany. (West Berliners were exempted from military service.)

How long will it take to regain normalcy, especially with the added burden of Berlin's eastern half, which has known nothing but an iron-handed state of the Brown or Red variety from 1933 to 1990? It will take one generation at least, perhaps even two.

For the time being, the main dynamics at work in Berlin are physical—the city's core is being transformed by political fiat, as was Washington by Pierre L'Enfant's grandiose blueprint, when the British had burned down the American capital in the war of 1812. But look again. True, some of the Wilhelmine architecture, including the Reichstag, is being lovingly reconstructed. But this isn't really a remake of the Wilhelmstrasse and the Reich Chancellory. As Michael Z Wise puts it in *Capital Dilemma: Germany's Search for a New Architecture of Democracy* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1998): "The Germans are creating a capital more consonant with Helmut Kohl's commitment to furthering a European Germany instead of a German Europe." Berlin is becoming the *Hauptstadt* of a "polycentric republic... in an age when national decisions are often taken in consultation with other EU countries."

Which brings us to the nightmare which haunts those who fear that the "Berlin Republic" will return to the ways of the Hohenzollerns and Hitlers. What about the irresistible lure of geography, a milder version of the *Drang nach Osten*? Trade, for instance?

Richie writes: "Unlike Bonn, Berlin has few historic ties with the west but has always looked to the east, either for commerce or for conquest," and she emphasises that trade with central and eastern Europe has already overtaken trade with the US. This is true, but also misleading. Almost 60 per cent of German exports go to the EU, and almost 80 per cent to the western industrial world.

The German economy has never been so tightly integrated into the west. Nor is this likely to change. Modern trade is competitive, not complementary. It is no longer German machinery for Polish hams, but German VW's for French Renaults and German Riesling for Italian Soave. Rich nations trade with other rich nations. Geography is not destiny in an age where transportation and communication costs keep dropping. In the old days, when pig iron, coal and wheat were hauled back and forth, propinquity mattered. Today, we trade high-value added goods with a minimal transportation cost component. "Shipping" a computer application from Bombay to Berlin costs nothing on the internet. Trade follows neither the flag nor the railroad, but the profit margin—and that is largely divorced from geography. Prague has to compete with Palo Alto not on proximity, but on price and productivity.

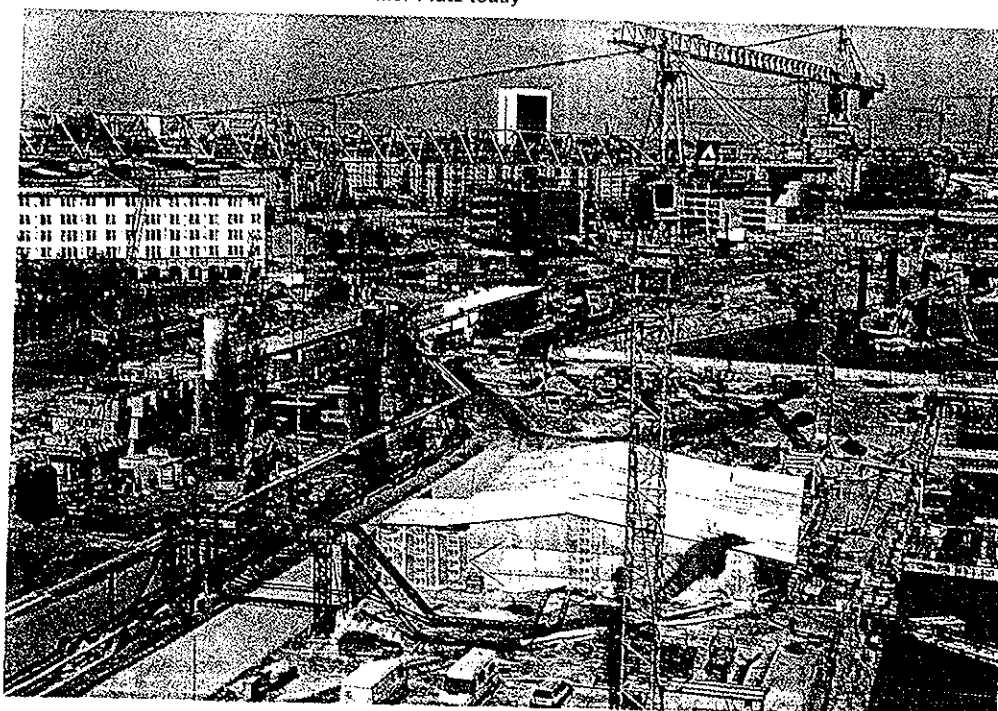
What about the geopolitical lure for a capital that is just an hour's drive away from Poland? Again, yesterday's analogies are more tempting than true. Check the western side of the scales. Nato, the EU, the US, France, a myriad of international organisations from the IMF to the WTO, are all *western* institutions. And on the eastern side? Plenty of targets—not, alas, of opportunity. Russia, with whom Germany has so often conspired against the west? Berlin has only done so when threatened or isolated by the west—when conquered by Napoleon or humiliated at Versailles.

What is there to conquer now that *Lebensraum* and eastern "bread baskets" no longer matter in an age of population decline and agrarian overproduction? Why would Germany conspire with Russia against the west when Germany is the west—a leading citizen of Nato and the EU? Why conspire with a Russia which is a recipient of western welfare, with little to threaten or tempt Berlin? On the other hand, why mess with Ukraine or the Baltics when the entire west tries to humour Russia in order to keep it on the democratic capitalist road?

What can be had in Prague, Warsaw and Budapest which cannot be had in Brussels, Paris and Washington: influence, respectability, even friendship? The point is that this new Germany, whether centred on Bonn or Berlin, has absorbed a lesson in this century that is both frightful and reassuring. Whenever Germany forged out on its own in search of land, security and glory, it reaped greater disaster. Yet when it sought power in community and cooperation, it succeeded beyond belief. Self-abnegation became the condition of self-assertion—almost cost-free, too. Because such habits are fed by self-interest and not by virtue, they will not soon die. It was no accident that Germany did not try to penetrate the east European power vacuum after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but instead linked up with the US to push for the Nato integration of Poland *et al.* Why fix something if it ain't broke?

Will this benign system last? Or will this web of communities which has blessed the west since 1949 go the way of all alliances once the threat has withered away? Alliances die when they win. Yet Nato and the EU keep expanding, defying the oldest law of international politics. This dynamic should make us wary of applying the past as a template for the future. And Germany and Berlin simply defy comparison with the past. "Like Goethe's Faust," concludes Richie, Berlin has "been given a 'second chance' to use its strength for good." The reason why Berlin will not blow it once again is that, this time, it is the capital of the "first successful liberal, democratic, capitalist, united Germany." That makes all the difference. ■

Postdamer Platz today



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