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Neil MacGregor

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For Barrie Cook
Curator at the British Museum
Polymath, Colleague and Counsellor
sine quo non

The final decision on whether the sculpture should travel to London for exhibition in 2014 was rightly taken by the congregation of Güstrow Cathedral. Pastor Höser:

'When Helmut Schmidt and Erich Honecker met here in 1981, a new moment in German history was triggered by the Angel. And now, after reunification, the two parts of Germany can still meet here and, with the help of the Angel, can converse. The theme of reconciliation is always present in our country. But we need it as a theme for Europe too: that is why it is important for us to give the Angel to London.'

There can be few objects which embody so much of German twentieth-century history as this sculpture from Güstrow: war fever in 1914, pacifism in the 1920s; the Expressionist art world of Käthe Kollwitz; the destruction of 'degenerate art' by the Nazis; the dubious compromises that dealers were nonetheless able to strike with the Third Reich; the Western Front in the First World War, and the bombing of Berlin in the Second; the post-war division of Germany and the dialogues that were possible in spite of it; the continuing painful and difficult conversations between Germany and the world in the quest for resolution and reconciliation. All of these have shaped the Angel and given it ever deeper and wider meaning. Like Germany itself, it has been dishonoured, destroyed, dismembered and refashioned. But it has always carried in itself the survival of an ideal, and the hope of renewal.

In the British Museum it will for a few months be part of another set of discussions about the links between Germany's past and its future. But the last word, or in this case the last silence, must be for Pastor Höser:

'While the sculpture is away, we decided not to put up any replacement, but to leave a void. That void, and our response to it, will be part of the London exhibition. I hope we can use it to address the questions it raises: are we ready to assume responsibility, are we willing to put ourselves on the line in the cause of reconciliation?'

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We began this journey through Germany's past at the Brandenburg Gate, now the nation's favourite setting for popular celebrations. I want to end it in the Reichstag, seat of the German Parliament and site of Germany's national deliberations. Both buildings have been shaped and reshaped many times, and witnessed great historical events. Both are invested with lasting symbolic significance. These two extraordinary buildings carry in their very stones the political history of the country.

The two are only a couple of hundred yards apart, today a popular tourist stroll – though for most of the last seventy years a difficult or impossible walk, for they were separated after 1945 by the boundary between the Soviet and the British zones of the occupied city, the fault-line of the Cold War that in 1961 became the Berlin Wall (see Chapter 2). Today the Wall has gone, leaving so little trace in this part of the city that tourists puzzle over where it must have been. Surprisingly that memory, though still live and bitter, has virtually no physical presence at the spot which was for decades its iconic centre.

Other memories, however, are all around. Clearly visible, just one block to the south, is the Holocaust Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (pages xxxvi–xxxvii), designed by the architect Peter Eisenman and completed in 2005, which, without tower or spire, nonetheless commands completely its urban



The Reichstag as restored by Norman Foster after 1992

surroundings. On the other side of the road, among the trees of the Tiergarten Park, close to both Gate and Parliament, are three much more modest and more recent monuments to those other groups whom, like the Jews, the Nazis killed simply for what they were: the physically and mentally disabled; homosexuals; and the Sinti (or Roma).

These memorials are here, in this place, by design: the decision to erect them was taken by Parliament after much deliberation. Thus, as parliamentarians make their way to the Reichstag, they are daily reminded of that terrible chapter of Germany's past. That memory will, it is hoped, inform their every debate. And the memorials are not just for the politicians – the intention was to shape the thinking of every citizen too, and to address the visiting world that comes in growing numbers to admire the new heart of this buzzing city. It is, as I said at the beginning of this book, hard to think of any international parallel to such an exercise in painful self-recollection. Has it worked? Christopher Clark believes that it has:

'The Third Reich, not just as a regime but with the assistance of hundreds of thousands of German citizens, commits crimes of such immensity and such barbarity that there is no gainsaying. There is no going back from the acknowledgement that these events impose a moral burden on the German nation. But what's remarkable after 1945 is the extent to which this is accepted, the guilt is internalized and becomes part of the German national identity. The awareness of a moral burden, of guilt for the horrific crimes of the Third Reich, drives deep roots into German national feeling and I think that's a unique feature of the German polity today, this self-critical awareness of having been morally contaminated by the misdeeds of a regime.'

The approach to the Reichstag itself is less solemn. Partly as a result of being so near the Wall, the area around was little developed, and the Reichstag stands now in an informal meadow on

which football alternates with sunbathing and holiday snaps. It is an unexpected setting for the grandiloquent palace erected in the 1880s to house the Parliament of the new, united German Empire proclaimed at Versailles in 1871. It is a typical building of late-nineteenth-century Europe, Roman Imperial in its (originally more decorated) architectural vocabulary, almost British Imperial in its monumental confidence, while its original square central dome gave it a peculiarly German swagger. Clearly this is the Parliament of a state that takes itself very seriously.

In the years following 1871, however, it became equally clear that this new state was reluctant to take its Parliament at all seriously. Bismarck disliked the slow, obstructive process of legislation with its necessary compromises, and he systematically blocked its exercise of real power. The young Kaiser Wilhelm II was as impatient with its claims of democratic legitimacy as he was with so much else. There was constant squabbling, the final tussle between Kaiser and Reichstag being played out over the words proposed to appear on the façade: 'Dem Deutschen Volke' – 'For the German People'. The Kaiser was strongly opposed to such a formulation, with its implication that ultimate authority did not reside with him, and proposed instead 'Der Deutschen Einigkeit' – 'For German Unity'. In 1916, in the middle of the First World War, the parliamentarians finally carried the day. The modernist architect and typographer Peter Behrens designed the lettering, and the bronze, melted from French cannon captured in the war against Napoleon, added a historical – and bellicose – twist to the resolutely democratic and modernist inscription.

Two years later, after the Kaiser had abdicated and when the war was nearly at an end, from a balcony below Behrens's bronze letters, the Social Democrat politician Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed the new German Republic on 9 November 1918. For the next fifteen years this building would house the Parliament of the Weimar Republic, and over it flew not the black, red and white



The Reichstag on fire, 27 February 1933

flag of Hohenzollern Prussia, but the black, red and gold of the Liberal Parliament of 1848 in Frankfurt (see Chapter 15). The Reichstag had become a real, democratic Parliament 'for the German people', unconstrained by monarchical power – though now under constant attack from both Left and Right.

For the past 130 years the Reichstag has been the central building of German history, its use, misuse and disuse reflecting the state of Germany in every sense. Its construction was funded by the huge indemnity exacted from France after the victory of 1871. The famous Reichstag fire of 27 February 1933, a few weeks after Hitler had come to power, was blamed by the Nazis on an unemployed Dutch communist. It not only severely damaged the building: it marked the end of democratic Germany, giving the Nazis the pretext to persuade President Hindenburg to approve



The Soviet flag over the ruins of the Reichstag, 1945

what were known as the 'Reichstag Fire Decrees', laws they used to abrogate key rights guaranteed by the Weimar Constitution, and so imprison, and in many cases eliminate, opponents from all sides. The building was not fully restored – the Nazis had always disliked its liberal associations – and under Hitler his puppet Parliament met at the nearby Kroll Opera House.

The damage done by the 1933 fire was rapidly overtaken by British and American bombs after 1940. As the war drew to a close Stalin chose the Reichstag, despite the Nazis' dislike of it, as the prime symbol of fascist Berlin. To capture it before May Day 1945 became something of a Soviet obsession, and huge numbers of men were sacrificed in the bloody and protracted hand-to-hand struggle, which finished with Red Army soldiers planting the Soviet flag on its bombed-out roof – a photograph which passed around the world and is still firmly lodged in the global memory as marking the final triumph of the Russians in the Second World War. Like Berlin itself, like the whole of Germany, the building had taken a terrible pounding: it is a tribute to the strength of its structures that it survived at all. The violent Russian chapter of

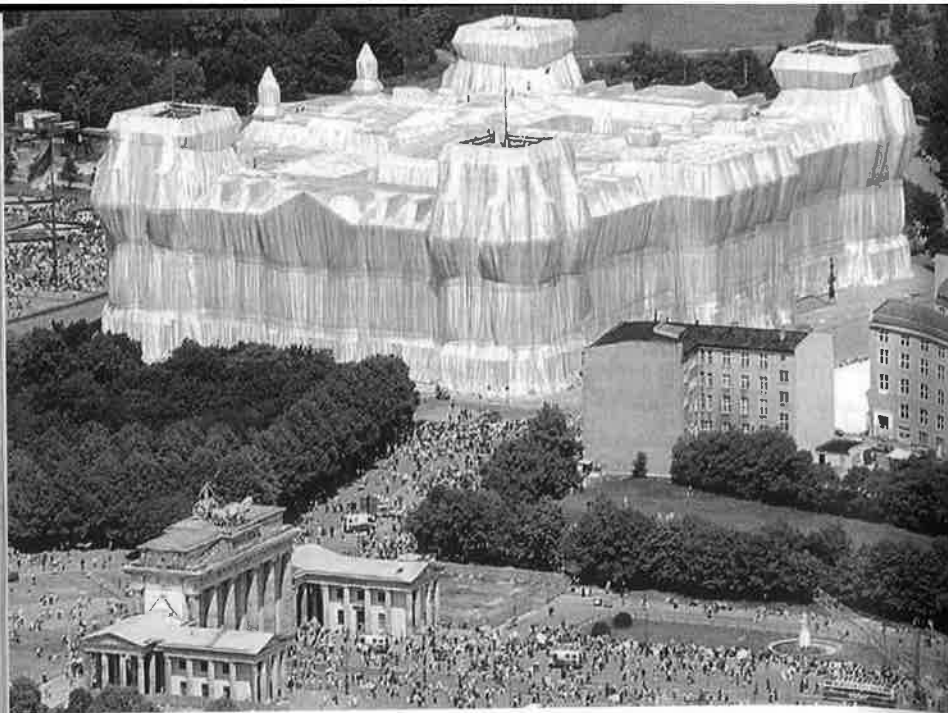
Russian graffiti from 1945 preserved in the restored building



the building's history can still be read today; indeed it can hardly be avoided. The restored building preserves in its public areas the graffiti scrawled in Cyrillic script by triumphant Russian soldiers. Among the predictable abuse and obscenity, 'Hitler Kaputt' is perhaps the most suitable to print. Visitors may explore the others at their leisure.

After 1945 the building languished – made usable, but hardly used, on the very edge of the western half of the city. The Federal Parliament now sat not in Berlin, but in Bonn. Much of the nineteenth-century sculptural decoration, deemed neither expressive nor exuberant, was removed in a restoration in the 1960s, and it was a simpler, utilitarian, indeed essentially provisional Reichstag that was the site in 1990 of the Treaty of Reunification between the two Germanys. It was resolved that the Reichstag building should, as after 1871, be the seat of the Parliament – now the Bundestag – of the newly reunited Germany. An international competition for the fundamental renewal of the building was launched, and in 1992 the British architect Norman Foster was commissioned. The willingness to choose a non-German was in itself a strong statement of the resolute internationalism of the reunited state. But for the Reichstag building to be a worthy home for the new pan-German Bundestag, it needed not just to be changed physically: the very *idea* of the building, disparaged by the Kaiser and despised by the Nazis, soiled by the intrigues around the fire and diminished by post-war neglect, had to be made new. The building and its scars of honour and shame had to be reinvented, as a tribune fit for the representatives of a free people. It had to be reborn, and it was.

The *Wrapping of the Reichstag* – the work of the artist Christo and his wife, Jeanne-Claude – is perhaps the most unexpected episode in the biography of this building. During two weeks, from 24 June to 7 July 1995, 90,000 square metres of silver fabric enveloped the entire building. Millions came to watch as the



The Reichstag wrapped by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, June 1995

old Reichstag, with all its disputed or contaminated past, disappeared from view. When it emerged from its huge silver chrysalis, it was a building transformed, able now to become what Germany needed it to be.

Monika Grütters was an MP in the state parliament at the time, closely connected to the project:

'It was only after Christo had wrapped the Reichstag – the building, the ruin – and opened our eyes to the true topography of this building, that we understood that it is in fact our house, the house of an entire population, a democratic building in which Parliament, the representatives of the people, sit. And something of the spirit of this happening survives today.

'The building at last became popular, touching passers-by. Suddenly it was more than just a building fulfilling a function, which it had only done half-heartedly because of its difficult history. It recovered its central

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position and, however absurd it may seem, it was Christo that did that through his wrapping – which was exactly his aim. In a few weeks, the wrapping of the Reichstag put years of history in a proper perspective.'

It is hard to think of an equivalent re-appropriation of a building by its public anywhere. It was a process that continued during its subsequent, carefully managed, metamorphosis under Norman Foster:

'I felt very strongly that the fabric as it emerged should preserve the scars of war, of civic vandalism if you like, of history, and that there should be a very clear demarcation between what was a record of the past in terms of a visible museum, the traces of history – that those graffiti, obscene or otherwise, should be an integral part of the fabric, and would convey messages of its past and its rebirth with clarity.'

Monika Grütters believes that for those working in the building, Foster's approach has been entirely successful:

'I am particularly conscious of the Russian Cyrillic graffiti, found inside the building, which come from the days in late April, early May 1945. They were written by soldiers of the Red Army, and in a simple, entirely compelling way they remind us that not long ago we were living under a dictatorship and were caught up in what was a collapse of humanity, before this building was able to recover its democratic dignity.'

The 'reborn' Reichstag was in one very visible aspect different from all previous states of the building. Over the chamber in which the MPs meet is a luminous, lofty glass dome, circled by walkways which allow the visitor to look down on the parliamentarians as they debate. It is an eloquent architectural metaphor: every day, without constraint, citizens can literally oversee their politicians. To a public brought up in the surveillance state of the GDR, with folk memories of the Nazis, or even merely with experience of police tactics in the Cold War Federal Republic, this is a heady statement of civic freedom. It was below this



Inside Foster's cupola

dome that in January 2014 Chancellor Merkel, responding to the revelations about US surveillance by Edward Snowden, asserted the need for citizens and Parliament to keep the security services under control (see Chapter 2). Monika Grütters:

'The cupola is an inviting place where visitors can walk above the chamber, the citizens are above while we parliamentarians sit below. And so, at last, the words on the façade "To the German People" ("Dem Deutschen Volke") have taken on their real meaning.'

Norman Foster, reflecting on his work, goes even further:

'It's about the relationship between the public and politicians and re-defining that in a way which is unique. It has become a symbol of a city. It has gone beyond that and become a symbol of a nation.'

In its 130 years the Reichstag has in fact been the symbol of many Germanys: the newly united Empire of the 1880s; the Weimar

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Republic's doomed liberal democracy, which perished in the 1933 fire; the fascist Nazi Reich which, like the building, was destroyed and then conquered by the Soviets and their Western allies; and the 25-year-old parliamentary democracy of today. Thanks to Foster's restoration every one of these memories is still present and active in the building. How far these noble architectural metaphors do in fact affect the behaviour of politicians is of course a matter 'For the German People'.

Berlin is a city that dreams in architecture. In that respect the Reichstag is but one example of this city's capacity to conjure new identities, or remember several pasts as it builds and rebuilds its historic centre. The Brandenburg Gate is modelled on the entrance to the Acropolis and decorated with sculpture echoing the Parthenon metopes: there could be no clearer declaration of Prussia's determination in the 1780s to make Berlin the new Athens. At the other end of Unter den Linden, sixty years later, that same dream of Berlin as the city of learning and art led Frederick William IV in the 1840s to designate the island opposite the Schloss 'a sanctuary for the arts': the Museum Island, a Parnassus on the

Berlin's Museum Island from the air





Spree, where museums in the form of classical temples, linked by colonnades, would allow the visitor to revisit the world of antiquity. Both Gate and Island speak of many nineteenth-century Germans' conviction of their similarities to the Ancient Greeks: separate tribes cherishing different identities yet working together, devoted to learning, spreading over vast areas (the Greek Mediterranean diasporas of Alexandria and Constantinople are often likened to the German cities of the Baltic and Eastern Europe). It was a fantasy the Prussians shared with the Bavarians (see Chapter 9), part of a new national self-definition as the freedom-loving Germans/Greeks, against the aggressive imperial French/Romans. Yet it sat strangely, even at the time, with Prussia's concurrent ambitions of military strength. And in today's context of Berlin's economic hegemony over southern Europe, this architecture asserting an essentially Greek Germany must surprise and distress some Mediterranean visitors.

A few hundred yards west of the Museum Island, the buildings of Unter den Linden propose another, earlier dream of Germany – the Prussian Enlightenment, as imagined (and in large



The 'Forum Fridericianum' (Bebelplatz): (left to right) the Opera, St Hedwig's Church, the former University library

measure realized) by Frederick the Great. The long process of renovation is now nearly complete. Christopher Clark explains what these meticulously restored buildings mean:

'I suppose one could say that what we're looking at here is a kind of architectural restatement of a particular vision of the Prussian state's mission in history. The Prussian state never defined itself solely in terms of military prowess. It was also what the Prussians called a *Kulturstaat*, a state designed and intended to pursue cultural objectives. You can see this in this extraordinary space that they call the Forum Friedricianum, a trio of very fine buildings built during the reign of Frederick the Great. In one corner St Hedwig's church, an extraordinary monument to interconfessional tolerance in a Protestant state, to allow the Catholics to build a very substantial cathedral in the centre of the town. On one side, the library which was semi-public. Normal people could go into this library and read the books there. On the other side the opera. A statement about tolerance, about books, about music. That's what Berlin was about, among other things, and it's in a sense to recover that sense of Prussia as a state of culture that these reconstructions have been happening.'

But, as so often in Berlin, there is a worm in the bud. In the centre of this noble square, a glass panel set into the cobblestones looks down on empty bookshelves. It is a memorial to yet another Germany. It was here, in May 1933, that Nazi students brought books from that 'semi-public' library and burnt them (see Chapter 24).

The Forum Fridericianum and the Museum Island witness to Prussia's belief in itself as a *Kulturstaat*. To many Germans, however, and to most of the rest of Europe, it was above all a militarist state. Opposite the Royal Palace, on Unter den Linden, Schinkel's Neue Wache (New Guard House, see Chapter 22) and the exuberant rococo Armoury speak just as powerfully of the central role of the army. Even before the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, the bellicose Prussian leadership was, in the view of many, driving Germany down a disastrous road of aggressive expansion. As most Germans would be quick to point out, Prussia was never the whole of Germany.

At the eastern end of Unter den Linden is the most contested of all Berlin's 'sites of memory'. Long the object of the vista from the Brandenburg Gate, reconstruction here is still vigorously in progress, and even more vigorously debated. Here stood the Stadtschloss, residence of the Hohenzollern kings and Kaisers, demolished by the GDR in the 1950s. In its place from the mid-1970s stood the Palast der Republik, seat of the Parliament at the GDR, itself demolished – to much protest from East Berliners – in 2006. On this site, the buildings of both the old Prussia and the GDR, memories of distant triumph and recent experience, have both been obliterated. Their traces and their shadows remain. After long discussion the Bundestag voted to build a replica of the old Stadtschloss, which is now rising fast. The vista down Unter den Linden will once again end as the Electors of Brandenburg intended. But this 'old' building hopes to be about a very modern Germany. It will house the world-famous Berlin collections of art



Reconstructing memory, August 2014: the Stadtschloss being rebuilt on its former site and that of the Palast der Republik

from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas. This time it will be the palace not of a militaristic Prussian dynasty, but of a new Germany and its capital's relationship with the world beyond Europe. Once again Berlin is building a dream: this time of a peaceful, enriching dialogue of cultures – European and Mediterranean on the Museum Island, the rest of the world in the Schloss whose meaning will now be as ambiguous as the Munich Siegestor with which this book began. The complex German past is here once again being reshaped by its monuments and memories.

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17. An artist for all Germans

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