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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 view from the Gate

If the modern state of Germany can be said to have a village green on which communal events are marked and celebrated, then it is the area around the Brandenburg Gate. It has long been Berlin's preferred setting for the city's meetings and rallies, but since the reunification of the two Germanys, the severe neo-classical gateway has become the natural backdrop to all great national events.

Professor Monika Grütters, the German Federal Minister of Culture, says:

'It is *the* national monument. There is no other that can compete with it. It is of course the symbol of the Berlin Wall, of a world divided into East and West. And it is at the same time the symbol of the fall of that Wall and of liberty regained. It stands for the division of Germany, and the division of the world, into two blocs: two ideas of society. It reminds us of the loss of freedom; but it is in itself also the great symbol of freedom regained. It is the national and the international monument of freedom and unity.'

Monika Grütters is talking about the meanings that all across the world have attached to the Brandenburg Gate since the Wall fell twenty-five years ago, but the history of the Gate, its own experiences and its far-reaching associations, go back ten times longer than that.

Originally the site of one of a number of gates around Berlin,



at which customs dues were collected from goods wagons entering the city, it was rebuilt in the 1780s on the orders of the Prussian king, Frederick William II, to a grand neo-classical design by Carl Gotthard Langhans. Based on the gateway to the Acropolis, it was conceived as a monument to peace, and it was one of the first architectural signals that Berlin – which under Frederick the Great had acquired a magnificent library, opera house and other similar institutions (see Chapter 30) – now felt entitled to proclaim itself a cultural and intellectual city in the Athenian tradition.

The Brandenburg Gate stands at the western end of the long avenue Unter den Linden (Under the Lime Trees), which, rather like the Champs-Élysées in Paris, runs from the edge of the city down to its very heart. At the eastern end of the avenue, closing the vista, was the Stadtschloss, the palace of the Hohenzollern kings. Some time after the Gate was built, a bronze figure of Victory, her chariot drawn by four horses, was placed on top, giving it the appearance of a triumphal arch.

The first person actually to use it for a triumphal entry was not,

The Hohenzollern Stadtschloss, 1700–1950



Napoleon's triumphant entry into Berlin, at the Brandenburg Gate, 1806

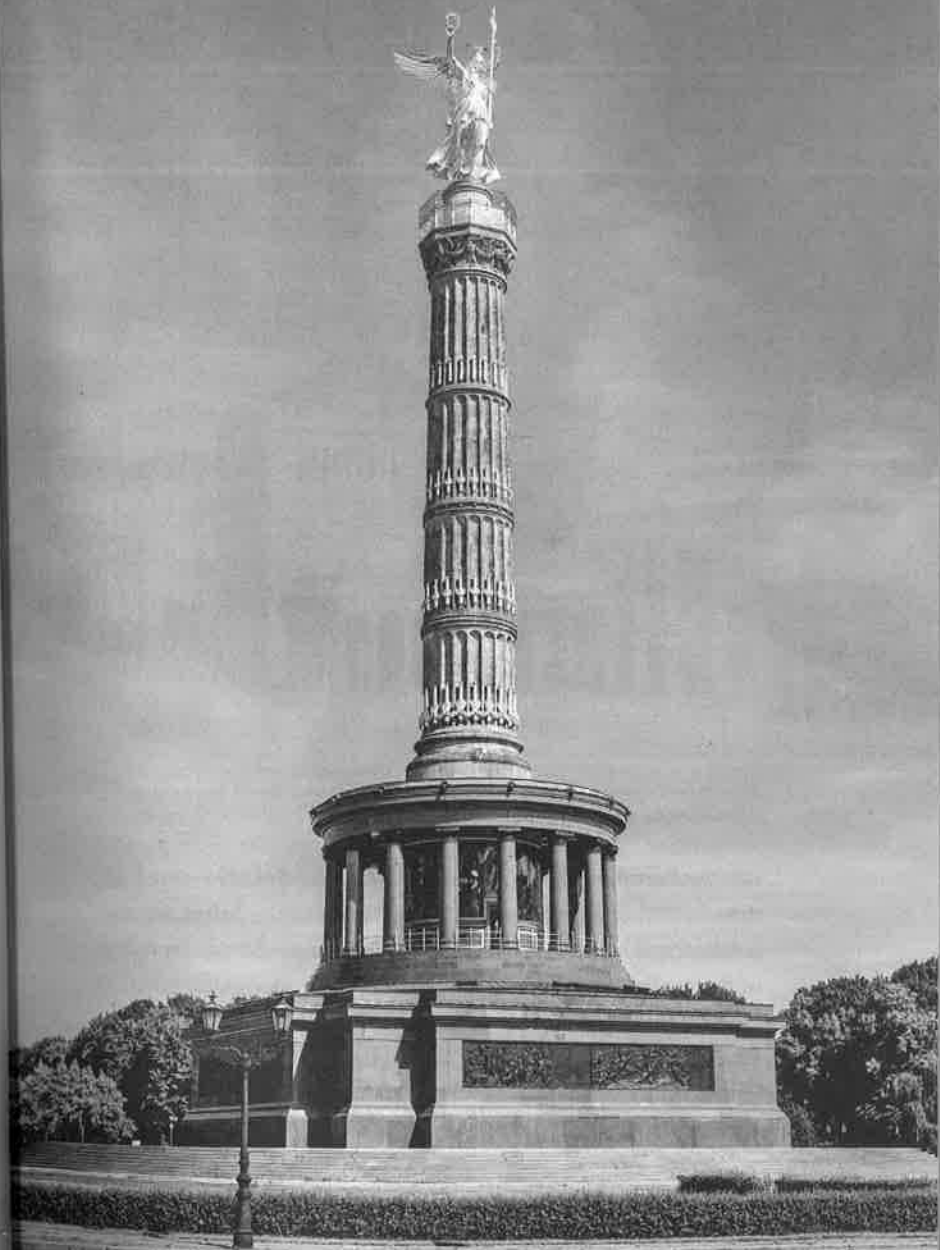
however, the King of Prussia, but Napoleon Bonaparte. After the defeat of Austria at the Battle of Austerlitz in December 1805, the only German state still offering serious resistance to the invader was Prussia. But on 14 October of the following year, Napoleon humiliateingly routed the Prussian army at the battles of Jena and Auerstädt. Two weeks later, on 27 October 1806, the French emperor entered Berlin in triumph, leading his troops through the Brandenburg Gate, marching them down Unter den Linden towards the palace of the king. The royal family fled to the eastern city of Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), where they began to plan Prussia's survival and recovery. Berlin was abandoned to French occupation. Napoleon, eager to demonstrate that his authority was now absolute and the Prussian king powerless in his own capital, removed the bronze quadriga from the top of the Gate and carried it away as a trophy, to be exhibited as war booty in Paris. For eight years the Brandenburg Gate was without its crowning sculpture.

In Königsberg the king and his advisers effected a complete reordering of the Prussian state, enabling it ultimately to take the leading part in resisting and expelling the French. In 1813, Prussian and Russian troops together forced Napoleon out of Berlin, and pursued him and his army all the way to Paris. In 1814, to scenes of public jubilation, the quadriga returned to the Brandenburg Gate. It was, however, modified before being reinstated. In the bronze chariot you see today, the statue of Victory is accompanied by the Prussian eagle, and her lance proudly bears the Iron Cross (see Chapter 14), the decoration awarded by the King of Prussia to those who had fought with valour against the French invader. The chariot makes clear that Napoleon had been defeated by a Germany which his invasion had largely created. The Gate had become a Prussian triumphal arch.

The Brandenburg Gate is not just a monument to which history has added layers of meaning. It is also a remarkable standpoint from which to view some of the key moments in German history. In fact, from this place alone, you can see evidence not just of the Napoleonic Wars, but of many other great events that have shaped the German national memory.

If you turn west and look along the broad avenue that leads to the royal palace at Charlottenburg, you see another figure of Victory, this time gilded and alone, standing on top of the 200-foot-high Siegestsäule (Victory Column), designed in 1864 to celebrate the Prussian victory over Denmark, which began the process of German unification. By the time it was finished, Prussia had also trounced the Austrians in 1866 and defeated the French in 1870 and the base was decorated accordingly to mark the triple triumph. Under Bismarck's guidance, the King of Prussia had become the German emperor, head of a united Germany which was the leading industrial and military power on the continent. The Victory Column's inauguration in 1873 signalled Berlin's new

The Siegestsäule, by Heinrich Strack, 1864-73





Albert Speer's model for the Third Reich's giant Hall of the People, with the Brandenburg Gate in the foreground

role in Europe and the world. In 1945 the French insisted on the removal of the sculpted plaques showing their defeat, but the column is otherwise broadly as intended, and still speaks today of the confident optimism of Berlin in the 1870s.

You could say that the westward view from the Brandenburg Gate is a view of Germany's place in the world as it actually was between 1870 and 1914. If things had gone as Hitler and Albert Speer had planned, the view north in the late 1940s would have

shown their idea of what that place ought to be. Speer, Hitler's cherished architect, designed a colossal Volkshalle, a Hall of the People. An enormous dome, over 1,000 feet high, crowned the assembly room in which 180,000 people could gather to listen to the Führer. It would have dwarfed completely the nearby Reichstag, and been an uncomfortable, megalomaniac neighbour to the Brandenburg Gate, itself a favourite site for Nazi marches and rallies. It is a strange experience, to stand on the spot from which you would have seen Speer's dome, had history turned out differently, and from which if you turn south, you can today see the approaches to the Holocaust Memorial.

But the views west, north or south from the Brandenburg Gate were always intended to be secondary. In a virtuoso piece of urban scenography it was the view east that mattered, down Unter den Linden, past Frederick the Great's library and opera house, and on to the end of the vista and the Stadtschloss. The Schloss, a huge baroque city-palace, was completed around 1700 and effectively designed to make one great statement: after seventy years of turmoil, in spite of the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), in spite of Swedish invasion (in the 1670s), Brandenburg – the modest state of which Berlin was the capital – had not only survived, but had emerged as a serious European power.

Its survival was remarkable. It is reckoned that in the 1630s the urban population of Brandenburg declined from 113,500 to 34,000, while its rural inhabitants fell from 300,000 to 75,000. Something like three quarters of the population had died or fled. After the war, the position in both town and country was stabilized and prosperity slowly began to return. In the 1670s the Swedes, the great military power of northern Europe, had invaded again, in alliance with the French. The then Elector of Brandenburg, known to history as the Great Elector, had brilliantly outmanoeuvred and defeated them. In a pleasing twist of political and economic revenge, when Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes







The Palast der Republik of the GDR, 1973/6–2006, on the site of the former Schloss

and expelled the Protestants from France in 1685, many of the most educated and most skilled of the Huguenots came to work in, and to enrich, Berlin. Among them were some of the craftsmen who shaped and embellished the palace. The Stadtschloss told the world that you did not mess with Brandenburg.

But as you look down Unter den Linden today, you can't see it. Badly damaged by bombing, it survived the Second World War, and could well have been rebuilt. The East German authorities decided instead to bulldoze the Hohenzollern Schloss, which they regarded as the physical symbol of a Prussian militarism that they now had the opportunity to annihilate. Only one small part of it was preserved – the balcony from which, on 9 November 1918, the Communist Karl Liebknecht had proclaimed the Free Socialist Republic of Germany, an attempt to create a Communist state which was rapidly crushed (see Chapter 22).

On the site of the old royal palace, the government of the German Democratic Republic built the new, modernist Palast der Republik, a steel structure clad in bronzed mirror-glass that was the seat of the People's Chamber and a centre for cultural and leisure activities until the GDR ended in 1990. But today you can't see that either. In the years after reunification there was intense debate about the proper future of the Palast der Republik in a new reunited Berlin, now that the people's representatives sat once again in the pan-German Reichstag. By 2008 the Palast der Republik had been demolished, allegedly because asbestos made it unfit for future use. With it disappeared many of the happier memories of old East Berlin. Its steel skeleton was melted down, sold and used to build the Burj Khalifa in Dubai.

Thus from the Brandenburg Gate today you can admire neither the triumph of the Great Elector nor the Socialist achievement of the German Democratic Republic. The historic vista now ends on a building site, where a reconstruction of the old Stadtschloss is rapidly taking shape (see Chapter 30). Behind it, though, still stands the other great monument of East Berlin, the thousand-foot-high Alexanderturm, a hi-tech telecommunications tower of the late 1960s designed to be unmistakably visible in West Berlin and to broadcast, in every sense, the virtues of the Socialist state. Still one of the tallest buildings in Germany, it dominates the skyline across the city. Just below its summit is a spherical operations centre with the inevitable revolving restaurant. But that is not the reason why the Alexanderturm has become part of Berlin's world of memories. By a quirk of geometry and reflection, whenever the sun shone, there appeared on the sphere a large incandescent cross – it still appears today and draws ironic smiles from the spectators at the Brandenburg Gate who remember the frustration and embarrassment the cross caused the atheist authorities in the GDR – it was quickly dubbed 'the Pope's revenge'.

Knocked about in the war, the Brandenburg Gate was patched

up and repaired by the occupying authorities. Situated right on the boundary between the Western and Eastern zones (and later between the two states), it was one of the authorized crossing points. As in the eighteenth century, it again became an entrance to Berlin, taking on a particular, charged, significance as a place for demonstrations. In 1953 it was the scene of the first major rebellion against Soviet rule in Eastern Europe, as tens of thousands of striking workers called for free elections and tore down the red flag flying over it. The unrest was put down by Soviet tanks. On 14 August 1961, one day after the building of the Wall began, West Berliners gathered on the other side of the Gate to protest against the erection of the Wall and the division of their city. Using these demonstrations as a pretext, the East German authorities closed the checkpoint there 'until further notice'. For twenty-eight years the Gate became a barrier. It did not reopen until 22 December 1989, when the West German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, walked through it to be greeted by the East German Prime Minister, Hans Modrow. There is no building or site that speaks so powerfully to Germans everywhere of the division and the reunification of their country.

Since reunification, the Brandenburg Gate has once again

Reunification medal by Erich Olt, 1989. The prison bars on one side turn into the Brandenburg Gate on the other. The prison side carries the title of the German national anthem: 'Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit' ('Unity and Justice and Freedom').



Opposite: The Alexanderturm, by Hermann Henselmann and Gerhard Kosel, operational 1969



## 2 Divided heaven

The restored Reichstag, where the German Parliament meets, stands in the heart of Berlin. Because of its position near the former border dividing East and West Berlin, there are now few buildings near it and it is set between a meadow on one side, and the banks of the River Spree on the other. On most days, the riverside is busy with sightseers and strollers, such as you might find by the Seine or the Thames. But it quickly becomes obvious that this could not be either London or Paris; it could only be in Berlin. In various places beside the river are rows of white crosses.

Günter Litfen 24 August 1961

Udo Düllick 5 October 1961

Hans Räwel 1 January 1963

Klaus Schröter 4 November 1963

Heinz Sokolowski 25 November 1965

Marinetta Jirkowsky 22 November 1980

It seems like a war cemetery, because all the dead were young. But it is not – the names are of some of those who were killed trying to escape from East to West Berlin after the building in August 1961 of the most potent symbol of the Cold War: the Berlin Wall.

Overleaf: White crosses by the River Spree, with the Bundeskanzleramt behind



World Cup celebrations at the Brandenburg Gate, June 2014

been renovated and is now at the centre of a pedestrianized zone, the gathering point of choice for celebrations of all sorts. And in the summer of 2014 it was once again used for a triumphal entry into the city – not by a French invader, but by the German football team, returning victorious from the World Cup in Brazil.

In the next chapter I shall be going down Unter den Linden towards the east, to explore some of the memories of the Cold War division of Germany. It was so effective and profound that those who lived in East and West have few memories in common. What all do remember is the difficulty of travelling from one Germany to the other and the price paid by those who tried to do so without authorization.

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