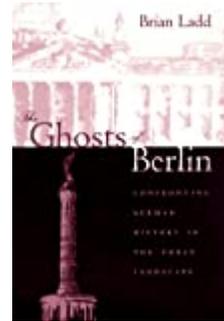




**Brian Ladd.** *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997. ix + 271 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-46761-0.



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### Preserving Berlin - But Which Berlin?

“Berlin is a haunted city” (p. 1). With these words, Brian Ladd, who teaches history at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, begins his study of Berlin’s civic identity and its urban landscape at the end of the twentieth century. The idea of the past as something that does not die, but rather remains to haunt, is not unique to Berlin among German cities; indeed, the history of the twentieth century haunts many European cities as city planners and experts on historical preservation evaluate what is of value and must be kept as opposed to what is not of value and must be demolished to make way for new housing, streets, or other public works. Although city planners in American cities usually enter into debates about the need for a public project or perhaps its aesthetics, the issue of historic preservation rarely generates such contentious and heated debates as it does in Germany. The age of German buildings only partially explains the fervor of these debates; rather, the tenor of such discussions is due in large part to the historical meanings attributed to German buildings as a result of Germany’s national history. It is in this sense that Ladd refers to the “haunting” of Berlin. Ladd begins his evaluation with the most recognizable landmark in Berlin, the Berlin Wall. He points out

how this landmark, even after its dismantling, has left a strong division between East Berliners and West Berliners with respect to issues of city planning and historic reservation.

From this starting point, Ladd discusses the buildings and monuments produced in five different periods in Berlin’s history, and examines how the physical structures left by each period have presented problems of remembrance and civic identity for present-day Berliners. Ladd separates his periodization of Berlin’s history into five segments: the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which kings and then emperors built their administrative buildings and Karl Friedrich Schinkel gave the city many of its most recognizable buildings; the early part of the twentieth century, when Berlin seemed to encapsulate every modernist aspiration (and fear) of its inhabitants; the Nazi period, when Adolf Hitler and Albert Speer envisioned the city as the heart of the German empire, a role to be punctuated with the building of gargantuan public structures imposing civic structures; the period of post-war division, when each half of the city sought to present itself as an exemplar of either commu-

nism or liberalism; and the present-day, reunified Berlin, which will serve as the capital of a reunified Germany and where many questions remain as to how to acknowledge and come to terms with Germany's past and Berlin's role in that past. Throughout the book, Ladd's inquiry into the historical meaning of these structures is never far removed from the present. The history behind the buildings is only a precursor to the "controversies over their disposition," and it is these controversies that have important ramifications for Berlin's civic identity which Ladd sets out to analyze in the course of his book. The organization serves a dual purpose: to place the buildings under study in a historical context and to demonstrate how that history is interpreted in the present day. Ladd moves fluidly between past and present, giving the reader a history of Berlin while drawing him or her into the center of the debates surrounding that history. One of the most interesting aspects of the book is the way in which Ladd explains how different interpretations of German history surface in the debates surrounding the planning of post-Wall Berlin.

Looming in the background of these debates (though not explicitly stated) is the issue of the German *Sonderweg*: the question of whether or not German history has been unique, and if that uniqueness in part explains the authoritarian systems of German government that culminated in the Third Reich and the Holocaust; or, whether Germany's history is different from that of other western European nations only in degree, and thus, the Third Reich and its actions can be explained as aberrations in German history. Ladd does not take a position in this debate, content to leave this to others; rather, he focuses on how the debate plays out in Berlin's landscape. The Holocaust and Nazism are the most prominent specters in his book, and it is when Ladd discusses these issues that the *Sonderweg* debate becomes most tangible. He shows how Berlin's landscape has come to represent debates over not only Berlin's history, but also the history of Germany. Coming to terms with the past has been a controversial issue among Germans after the war [witness the discussion surrounding Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York, 1996) or the debate surrounding a recent exhibit in Munich about the crimes of the Wehrmacht (the German regular army)]. What is unique in Ladd's discussion of these topics is his explanation of how these issues are perpetually present in the very buildings of the city.

Two sites that Ladd examines in this light are the Reich Ministry Aviation building and the site of the Gestapo headquarters. The scale of Nazi building projects makes

demolition of them impractical; and yet, as the example of the Reich Ministry of Aviation building shows, what remains can be useful on strictly utilitarian grounds. Controversy has arisen in determining how to recognize and commemorate the building's place in German history. The west-Berlin-dominated city government of the reunified Berlin saw fit to place a plaque on the Reich Ministry of Aviation building commemorating the 1953 East German worker's uprising that occurred there, but has been no consensus on any commemoration to recognize the victims of the Luftwaffe's bombing campaigns. Recognizing any aspect of the Nazi terror, Ladd points out, is difficult, and those that have gained most widespread acceptance are those exhibits that generally serve to commemorate without too specific of a judgment. Such has been the case in the *Topography of Terror*, where Ladd indicates what started as a provisional exhibit after the discovery of the prison cells in the basement of the Gestapo headquarters during a 1985 archaeological dig. The *Topography of Terror* has been successful, argues Ladd, because "the organizer's emphasis on documentation rather than interpretation or judgment successfully avoided the usual controversies about understanding the Third Reich's role in German history" (p. 162). It was a place that remembered the perpetrators more than honoring the victims. The connection to German society, Ladd points out, was made by "examining the terror's geographical embeddedness in Berlin" (p. 163). Such an exhibit recognized Germany's (and specifically, Berlin's) role in the Third Reich, but at the same time focused attention on the leaders of the state, and not "ordinary men." In both examples, remembrance of the past is framed within conceptions of Berlin's civic identity.

What is also significant about Ladd's work is his emphasis on the increasing conflict over how to commemorate the government of the GDR—a topic that, to date, has received little attention from urban historians. There is a strong urge on the part of the "Wessies" to view the buildings and monuments of the GDR as relics of another authoritarian German government. While there is no lingering love among "Ossies" for the government of Honecker and Ulbricht, there is a sense of identity that ties East Berliners to the buildings and monuments of their city. Ladd points to the example of a statue of Lenin that served as a focal point for an apartment complex. To West-Berliners, the statue served as a reminder of a defeated cause, and therefore, they viewed the removal of the statue as "completing the revolution of 1989" (p. 197). East-Berliners saw the statue in quite different terms. For

them, the statue became a representation of their experience as Berliners, aside from any strict political ideology. Ladd cites one East-Berliner as saying, "For me it's not about Lenin, but rather about demonstrating our power and not letting ourselves be pushed around" (p. 197). East Berliners felt that they too had contributed to the form of the city, and that the history of East Berlin should not be erased by arrogant "Wessies" acting in the manner of a conquering power. As the process of reunification proceeds and Berlin is established as the capital of Germany, such issues are bound to bring their own controversy, compounded by the different ideological interpretations of East and West with regard to the Third Reich.

For a historian examining the formation of civic identity based upon contemporary notions about the past, source material can be problematic. Ladd relies primarily on articles from periodicals, pamphlets, and a variety of secondary sources. He makes very good use of all of these sources, and to be sure, it is simply not possible to access the same types of primary sources that a historian writing about civic identity and city planning in a more distant era might make use of (such as mem-

oirs, minutes of important meetings, etc.). While reading the book, however, one cannot escape the feeling that Ladd has had extensive contact with a variety of Berliners while researching this book, and this begs the question of why there is no use of personal interviews—particularly of some of the important political actors discussed by Ladd such as Hans Stimmann (Berlin's city building director until 1996), Eberhard Diepgen (Mayor of Berlin from 1984-1989 and 1990-present), or any of the other interesting characters that we are introduced to in the course of reading the book. Such interviews could provide interesting and more candid insights into how Berliners themselves see their city—particularly those directly involved in city planning. This does not, however, significantly detract from what is a valuable look at the ways in which a city's landscape is read by its inhabitants in terms of contesting interpretations of civic identity.

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