

# REMEMBERING BERLIN

## MAT TRINCA

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photo: George Serrus



**THERE is no getting away from Berlin's tortured history. Every street, every building, every face in the city tells you that its past is thought and lived every day.**

In these terms, the city is its own museum. There are still physical traces of the Berlin Wall to see, and an even greater fascination 'detecting' it in the strange absences of the built environment. Open lots unaccountably cut a swathe across city streets; buildings finish abruptly, almost unresolved. There once went the Wall.

Walk down Friedrichstrasse and you find a reproduction of the guardhouse at Checkpoint Charlie (the original is in the Allied Museum). The renowned private museum nearby has a constant stream of visitors queuing to view its hoard of objects from the city's divided past.

But the city is also a dynamic, changing text. When I visited in June, I walked past the guardhouse and came across the arresting sight of 1065 wooden crosses set between reconstructed sections of the Wall. Since then, this private memorial to people killed fleeing the former East Germany has been torn down amid arguments over how best to honour the past.

Such disputes are outward signs of a culture grappling with its memories, though no one now suggests that the past can be ignored, much less forgotten. On the contrary, all Berliners seem involved in the practice of their city's very public history. When I returned to work after my recent visit, a colleague handed me a book bought from his Berlin taxi-driver, who had painstakingly compiled a volume of 'before and after' photographs of the Wall.

This is enough to show that the German capital takes seriously its obligation to confront historical demons head-on. Open argument and debate is just part of the bargain. Nothing, not even a renascent civic pride, is excused from responsibility to consider an historical perspective.

Another example. At the Brandenburg Gate – now a symbol of the reunification – city fathers have created a new plaza. A celebration of Berlin's rebirth, it comes complete with squeaky clean cobbles and already attracts hordes of tourists. Temporary panels erected in the square describe the redevelopment project with reference to the area's devastation by the end of World War Two.

Yet, just for good measure, the display also reminds Berliners and their guests that the city's annihilation came after Germany's bombing of Coventry and its merciless attack on Stalingrad. There is no plaintive call for sympathy, rather a brutally honest explanation that the city's fate was tied to its part in once-unthinkable horrors.

Nearby, the labyrinth of the new Holocaust memorial witnesses the millions murdered by the Third Reich. Though some distance from it, the memorial complements Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum, with its three subterranean axes of continuity, exile and holocaust. Walking on the steel discs of artist Menashe Kadishman's 'Fallen Leaves' in the museum's 'Memory Void' – upturned faces yielding up anguished cries under each step – was deeply disturbing. Almost a relief, then, to ascend and visit the galleries that chronicle the long history of the Jewish people in Germany.

Professionally, Berlin's past might appear to present almost insurmountable challenges for museum workers. How could one possibly address the gravity of the city's last century without descending into an endless litany of anguish? And in a place that has been so recently divided, what is the right note of unity and difference to strike?

At the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Dr Hans-Martin Hinz – a frequent visitor to Australia – admits no easy solutions. Instead, he puts his faith in the lived experience of Berliners and in representing an enlarged historical frame that reaches beyond the nation's borders.

The museum's current exhibition marking the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War Two, *The War and its Consequences*, is at pains to show the horrors of National Socialism. Yet it makes the point that long-standing German values, such as intellectualism and tolerance, were also casualties of the Nazi age.

'We seek to present German history in its European and international contexts', he says. 'Our history was never an isolated history, and people in Berlin are accustomed to dealing with a complex past every day. They respond well to our exhibitions that examine the past from different points of view.'

*The War and its Consequences* resists simplification. There are no quick declarations, no facile explanations of collective victimhood or guilt. The past is accepted as a complex, layered field. This is not cultural relativism, but an understanding of the sheer difficulty that persists in untangling strands of historical truth.

Dr Hinz and his colleagues take the view that people can handle these difficult, contested debates. Their intention is to speak openly, with fairness and clarity, and let visitors form their own historical understanding. It is a view of audiences that is, in the end, affirming and encouraging, much like Berlin itself. 🐾

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