City-Lit
Berlin

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Extract

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Editor's Note

A first visit to Berlin can be like finally meeting a relative you've heard stories about all your life – a relative with something of a 'reputation'. Despite warnings you are drawn to her complexities and contradictions, her insouciant self-confidence masking insecurity, and the fact that she so clearly wears her past on her sleeve.

What we hope *city-lit BERLIN* provides is a way of beginning to get under the skin of this amazing, chameleonic city that embodies so much of twentieth-century history – both the good and the bad – and that has picked itself up after its disasters and turned itself into a vibrant centre of culture and fun as well as serious reflection. We are also using it to promote German writing previously unpublished in English, with nearly twenty extracts chosen by my co-editor in Berlin, translator and 'lovegermanbooks' blogger Katy Derbyshire.

city-lit BERLIN contains a wide range of texts and genres, from German classics like Theodor Fontane's *Effie Briest* and Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* to blogs by enthusiastic visitors like Simon Cole. It doesn't shy away from the past (see Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* and Anna Funder's *Stasiland*), but also gives a portrait of the Berlin of today (as when Tobias Rapp takes us clubbing). Alongside well-known texts like Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* sit recently published works like Chloe Aridjis' *Book of Clouds*. Big historical events are told both through fiction (Beatrice Collins' *The Luminous Life of Lilly Aphrodite*) as well as by veteran reporter John Simpson. There is the ferocious humour of Thomas Brussig's *Heroes Like Us* and the anguish of Eva Figes' *Tales of Innocence and Experience*. Writers of a dozen national origins include young Kashmiri Nitasha Kaul, Indian writer and journalist Salil Tripathi, and Turkish author and actress Emine Sevgi Özdamar.

Inevitably there are omissions: we began with a collection of extracts roughly twice as long as the finished book. We would like to have included a piece from Erich Kästner's children's book *Emil and the Detectives* but found it didn't sit happily among the adult texts. The work of Kurt Tucholsky is missing, and we only have a small sample of the many spy-and-thriller novels set in Berlin. Recommendations for 'further reading' would include the books of Peter Schneider, and Martha Gellhorn's account of her time in Berlin. We have tried to introduce readers to new names, or old names in new contexts. A collection to be used as a starting point for further exploration.

Above all, Katy Derbyshire and I hope your pleasure in reading this collection matches the rich experience we have had in putting it together.

Heather Reyes

Oxygen Books would like to thank the Goethe Institute, London for supporting our commissioned translations of German texts.

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Why are we drawn to certain cities? Perhaps because of a story read in childhood. Or a chance teenage meeting. Or maybe simply because the place touches us, embodying in its towers, tribes and history an aspect of our understanding of what it means to be human. Paris is about romantic love. Lourdes equates with devotion. New York means materialism. London is forever trendy.

Berlin is all about volatility. Its identity is based not on stability but on change. No other city has repeatedly been so powerful, and fallen so low. No other city has inspired so many artists and witnessed so many murders. It's a capital city made up of villages. An island long adrift on a foreign sea. A city where history broods. Its legends, both real and imagined, stalk the streets: Lenin drinks at the same café as Bowie's heroes, Wim Wender's trench-coated angels wing above torch-lit Nazi processions, Speer conjures myths from the same canvas as Georg Grosz, Dietrich shops alongside Sally Bowles at Ka De We, le Carré's George Smiley watches the packed trains leave for Auschwitz.

I was once a baby-boom Canadian 'doing' Europe, a child of the most liberal and stable of nations. During a happy, footloose summer I climbed the Eiffel Tower, tripped down the Spanish Steps and made love under the stars on an Aegean beach. Then on the last week of the holiday I saw the Wall. The sight of that brutal barrier shook me to my core. At the heart of the continent were watchtowers, barbed wire and border guards who shot dead 'defectors' because they wanted to live under a different system. I knew the history. I understood what had happened. But I couldn't conceive how it had happened. The individuals whose actions had divided Germany and Europe – the wartime planners, the Soviet commissars, the Grepo – weren't monsters. They were ordinary men and women. I ached to understand their motivation, how they came to act as they did, yet at the same time I was repulsed by their crimes and needed to give voice to their victims' suffering. A decade would pass before I began doing that, putting pen to paper, writing my first book as the Wall fell, then another fifteen years and six more books before I settled in the city.

Berlin's unpredictable undercurrents long attracted artists. The historian Peter Gay wrote that living in the city in the Golden Twenties was the dream of 'the composer, the journalist, the actor; with its superb orchestras, its 120 newspapers, its forty theatres, Berlin was the place for the ambitious, the energetic, the talented. Wherever they started, it was in Berlin that they became, and Berlin that made them famous.' During the Weimar years it was the world's most exciting

city. Here Walter Gropius conceived the Bauhaus, Weill penned 'The Ballad of Mack the Knife' and Isherwood immortalized the cabaret. Nabokov, Kafka, Auden and Spender were inspired in its cafés. At Babelsberg Studio Fritz Lang filmed 'Metropolis' while von Sternberg and Dietrich created 'The Blue Angel'. For ten breathless years, artists and intellectuals danced on the edge of a volcano. When their vision of a new world was rejected by Germans in 1933, the year Hitler became Chancellor, Berlin's exiles carried their new modernity abroad.

Situated on a long plain of marshes stretching as far as Warsaw, medieval Berlin was an uncultured spot. Christianity did not take root here until the twelfth century. Robber barons and the plague besieged the primitive outpost as late as the fifteenth century. It was the Hohenzollern princes who wrested a capital from the swamps with hard work and immigrants. But the princes' obsession with military power also laid the foundations for the bullish force of Prussia, the 'army within a state' which aspired to European domination. It's no wonder that Goethe loathed the place, equating it with the Devil's world. At the outbreak of the First World War, Berlin was a grandiose capital dominated by pomp, parades and overbearing buildings of immense ugliness. 'Groups of people everywhere, and in addition, soldiers marching out of the city, showered with blossoms as they went. Every face looks happy: we have war!' cheered the actress Tilla Durieux in 1914. But within a year disillusionment had set in and, by 1918, some 350,000 young Berliners had been killed in action. The ignominy of defeat and the vindictive Versailles Treaty made the returning troops ideal candidates for radicals on both the left and right. Revolution, insurrection and political assassinations characterised the next desperate years and – along with the wild inflation of 1922–23 – shattered respect for tradition. Then, in 1924, the American-led Dawes Plan stabilised the mark, fuelling a bubble of prosperity and stimulating a remarkable cultural flowering that bridged east and west and transformed Berlin into the international capital of modernism. Almost overnight the population boomed, industrial output soared above pre-war levels and Germany became second only to the US in value of world exports. The city pulsated with life and easy money. Hungry for experimentation, artists from Britain, France, America and Russia moved to Berlin, attracted by creative and sexual freedom, as well as by the least repressive censorship laws in Europe. Heinrich Mann called it 'a city of excitement and hope'. But for all its frenzied, prodigious output, the decade

was golden for only a small minority, many of whom were outsiders. In 1926 a young Jospeh Goebbels – another of many ambitious story-tellers – arrived at the Anhalter Bahnhof, determined to 'take the city' for an aspirant Hitler. At the time there were fewer than 200 Nazi Party members in Berlin, while the Communists boasted a membership of 250,000. In an audacious move Goebbels cast the Communists – along with the Jews – as the scapegoats for society's ills. He orchestrated hundreds of street battles against them to gain publicity. He took advantage of the resurgent financial crisis and, after 1929, of mass unemployment (one third of the city's labour force was out of work towards the end of the Great Depression). His Machiavellian mastery of propaganda exploited the suffering of Berlin's majority; like most Germans they embraced the Nazi's radical solutions in response. In the month following Hitler's accession to power over 50,000 Berliners joined the Party.

The minority left-wing avant-garde was easily destroyed. German literature went up in smoke in the 1933 book burnings. Bertolt Brecht, Alfred Döblin, Mann and many other writers fled the country, alongside Lang, Einstein and Mies van der Rohe. With the Nazis' arrogant triumph Hitler proposed rebuilding Berlin as 'Germania', the new capital of the populist, nationalistic 'Thousand Year Reich'. 'In ten years no one will recognise the city' he boasted. During the Second World War more bombs fell on it than on the whole of England. By 1945 three-quarters of the city lay in ruins.

The victorious Allies divided Berlin into four sectors. Stalin's secret intention was to draw it – and then the whole of Germany – into the Communist orbit. In 1948 he blockaded the city as a means of driving the Americans out of Europe, but the Allies retaliated by launching the Berlin Airlift to sustain its freedom. With the brutal suppression of the 1953 uprising, hundreds of thousands of East Germans began moving west, forcing the Communists to close their escape route by building the Wall. Behind it East German literature flourished, though not necessarily in print due to strict censorship. In the encircled western sectors writers struggled to come to terms with the recent past, handicapped by both widespread denial and young men moving to West Berlin only to escape military service, their spirit of refusal emasculating criticism and engendering self-indulgence. The return to literature of quality – influenced by the residencies of Heinrich Böll, Wolf Biermann, Günter Grass and Uwe Johnson as well as Ryszard Kapuscinski, Cees Nooteboom and Susan Sontag – was accelerated by reunification. The city has emerged from its dark anger to become

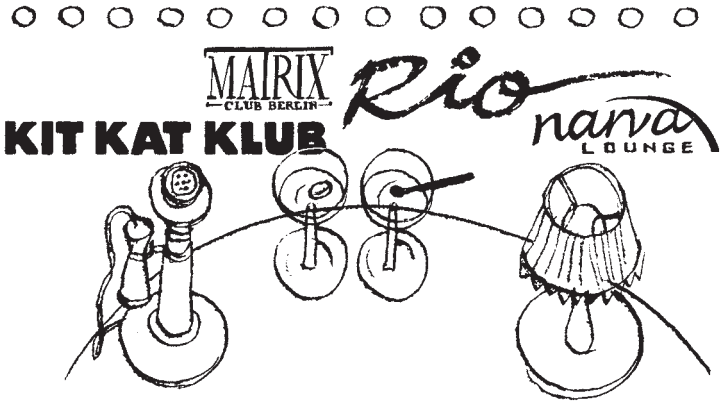
again a creative capital of Europe: cool, experimental, bohemian, with cheap rents and an irony-free exuberance that attracts aspiring scribblers and the international cultural elite alike. East and west, German and foreign, meet once more, as illustrated in the work of Thomas Brussig, Bernhard Schlink and Uwe Tellkamp, Jeffrey Eugenides, Jonathan Franzen and Imre Kertesz.

Today I ride my bicycle past the site of the wooden observation stand where I decided to become a writer, across the former death strip, to the glittering glass and steel phoenix of Potsdamer Platz. Near to it is the Holocaust Memorial, the undulating labyrinth of concrete plinths which commemorates the murdered European Jews. The black husk of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, destroyed by Allied bombs in 1943, casts a long shadow along buzzy Kurfürstendamm. At my son's school an old brick wall is still pockmarked from machinegun fire. A young German painter told me recently, 'I do not want to say that they – the SS officers, the guards by the Wall, the Stasi interrogators – are like us. It is different, worse I guess. They are us – and we would have been them, in our respective times. It does not mean that I think we – the Germans – are likely to ever become Nazis again. Germany is a profoundly different land now, its identity reshaped forever by cataclysmic events. But it is the potency of us, them, me, to have been part of such events that is the horror today.'

Of all human characteristics change is ever the most constant. Germans no longer shy away from acknowledging the darkness in their past. Convinced of the Freudian idea that the repressed (or at least unspoken) will fester like a canker unless it is brought to light, Germany has subjected itself to national psychoanalysis. Past atrocities are unearthed and confessed, as a condition of healing, as if the psychic health of a society depends upon it. This courageous, humane and moving process is inspiring painters and authors at home and abroad, illuminating legends real and imagined, galvanizing again this volatile, ever-changing city … for a time.

Rory MacLean, Berlin 2009

Rory MacLean, author of the much acclaimed *Stalin's Nose* and *Under the Dragon*, lives in Berlin where he is writing a book on the city and its ghosts.



‘Come to the cabaret … ’

So, ‘WILLKOMMEN IN BERLIN’ … Welcome to Berlin.

I love this sprawling town. I love the anarchy of stone and flesh visible only at night. The city is a web. The city is my mother. I love her. I love her wide boulevards, I love her open squares. I love the radical proletarian style that she has adopted; I love how she can shine with splendour underneath the grime. I love her penchant for slumming, her nightly quest for an authentic and purifying anarchy of body and soul – unlike Paris, Berlin will never be serenaded in poetry or depicted in delicate watercolours. This city is a snapshot; you need the fleetingness of newsprint and a theatre of moving images to do her justice. Berlin is the New York of the old world; the only true New York of the old world, a city with enough *cojones* to dance on the dangerous edge of splendour and doom.

Paul Verhaeghen, *Omega Minor*

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Berlin. I used to love this old city. But that was before it had caught sight of its own reflection and taken to wearing corsets laced so

tight that it could hardly breathe. I loved the easy, carefree philosophies, the cheap jazz, the vulgar cabarets and all of the other cultural excesses that characterized the Weimar years and made Berlin seem like one of the most exciting cities in the world.

Philip Kerr, *March Violets* in *Berlin Noir*

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I did not find Berlin a beautiful town, but an exciting one; without question a capital city, as different from Hamburg as London from Liverpool. Its particular spell grew on you, so they said, but it had an immediate attraction for me in that the buoyancy of its climate made nonsense of such little indulgencies as 'feeling tired'. I also discovered to my pleasure that the irrepressible Berliners were utterly indifferent as to what impression they or their massive chunks of Wilhelminian architecture made on outsiders. You could take Berlin or you could leave it […]; the inhabitants themselves, the *Ur-Berliner*, could think of no better place in the world to live.

I wanted to live there too, but by making up my mind that, for the sake of the children, I must have a house with a garden, and by deciding rather rashly that Berlin-Dahlem would suit me nicely, I added a private problem to the many others which were keeping my head buzzing. For I also discovered in Berlin that it was not only the sparkling air which differed from the misty haze of the north German seaport; something of the essential nature of the political issues at stake stood out there with a crystal clarity which at first took my parochial breath away.

Christabel Bielenberg, *The Past is Myself*

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Elias Canetti (1905–1994) – probably best known today for his novel Auto-da-Fé *– was bowled over by his first visit to the city as an impressionable 23-year-old.*

So here I was in Berlin, never taking more than ten steps without running into a celebrity. Wieland knew everyone and introduced me to everyone right away. I was a nobody here and quite aware of this; I had done nothing; at twenty-three, I was nothing more than a hopeful. Yet it was astonishing how people treated me: not with scorn, but with curiosity, and, above all, never with condemnation. I myself, after four years under Karl Krauss's influence, was filled with all his contempt and condemnation and acknowledged nothing that was determined by greed, selfishness, or frivolity. All objects to condemn were prescribed by Krauss. You were not even allowed to look at them; he had already taken care of that for you and made the decision. It was a *sterilized* intellectual life that we led in Vienna […].

And suddenly, the very opposite came in Berlin, where contacts of any sort, incessant, were part of the very substance of living. This brand of curiosity must have agreed with me, though I did not realize it; I yielded naïvely and innocently, and just as I had strolled into the maws of tyranny right after my arrival in Vienna, where I had been kept nicely aloof from all temptations, so too, in Berlin, I was at the mercy of the hotbed of vice for several weeks. […]

Everything was equally *close* in Berlin, every kind of effect was permitted: no one was prohibited from making himself noticeable if he didn't mind the strain. For it was no easy matter: the noise was great, and you were always aware, in the midst of noise and tumult, that there were things worth hearing and seeing. Anything went. The taboos, of which there was no lack anywhere, especially in Germany, dried out here. You could come from an old capital like Vienna and feel like a provincial here, and you gaped until your eyes grew accustomed to remaining open. There was something pungent, corrosive in the atmosphere; it stimulated and animated. You charged into everything and were afraid of nothing.

Elias Canetti, *The Torch in my Ear*
translated by Joachim Neugroschel

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For many Anglophone readers, Christopher Isherwood's Berlin novels provide their first literary experience of the city in the last days of the Weimar Republic, just before the disaster of National Socialism destroyed it. Who can think of Berlin without recalling the stage show and film Cabaret, *with Liza Minelli playing Sally Bowles, and such songs as 'Money, money, money' and the title song itself, inviting us to 'come to the cabaret'? The rule-flouting cabaret performances of the time had become a magnet for the free-thinking world – though, by the end, not all were as glamorous as a young man had come to expect …*

A few days later, he took me to hear Sally sing. The Lady Windermere (which now, I hear, no longer exists) was an arty 'informal' bar, just off the Tauentzienstrasse, which the proprietor had evidently tried to make look as much as possible like Montparnasse. The walls were covered with sketches on menu-cards, caricatures and signed theatrical photographs – ('To the one and only Lady Windermere.' 'To Johnny, with all my heart.'). The Fan itself, four times life size, was displayed above the bar. There was a big piano on a platform in the middle of the room.

I was curious to see how Sally would behave. I had imagined her, for some reason, rather nervous, but she wasn't, in the least. She had a surprisingly deep husky voice. She sang badly, without any expression, her hands hanging down at her sides – yet her performance was, in its own way, effective because of her startling appearance and her air of not caring a curse what people thought of her. Her arms hanging carelessly limp, and a take-it-or-leave-it grin on her face, she sang:

Now I know why Mother
Told me to be true;
She meant me for Someone
Exactly like you.

There was quite a lot of applause. The pianist, a handsome young man with blond wavy hair, stood up and solemnly kissed Sally's hand. Then she sang two more songs, one in French and the other in German. These weren't so well received.

After the singing, there was a good deal more hand-kissing and general movement towards the bar.

Sally seemed to know everybody in the place. She called them all Thou and Darling. For a would-be demi-mondaine, she seemed to have surprisingly little business sense or tact. She wasted a lot of time making advances to an elderly gentleman who would obviously have preferred a chat with the barman. Later, we all got rather drunk. Then Sally had to go off to an appointment, and the manager came and sat at our table. He and Fritz talked English Peerage. Fritz was in his element. I decided, as so often before, never to visit a place of this sort again. […]

Last night, Fritz Wendel proposed a tour of 'the dives'. It was to be in the nature of a farewell visit, for the Police have begun to take a great interest in these places. They are frequently raided, and the names of their clients are written down. There is even talk of a general Berlin clean-up.

I rather upset him by insisting on visiting the Salomé, which I had never seen. Fritz, as a connoisseur of night-life, was most contemptuous. It wasn't even genuine, he told me, the management run it entirely for the benefit of provincial sightseers.

The Salomé turned out to be very expensive and even more depressing than I had imagined. A few stage lesbians and some young men with plucked eyebrows lounged at the bar, uttering occasional raucous guffaws or treble hoots – supposed, apparently, to represent the laughter of the damned. The whole premises are painted gold and inferno-red – crimson plush inches thick, and vast gilded mirrors. It was pretty full. The audience consisted chiefly of respectable middle-aged tradesmen and their families, exclaiming in good-humoured amazement: 'Do they really?' and 'Well, I never!' We went out

half-way through the cabaret performance, after a young man in a spangled crinoline and jewelled breast-caps had painfully but successfully executed three splits. […]

'Ever been to that communist dive near the Zoo?' Fritz asked me, as we were walking away from the Salomé. 'Eventually we should cast an eye in there … In six months, maybe, we'll all be wearing red shirts … '

I agreed. I was curious to know what Fritz's idea of 'communist dive' would be like.

It was, in fact, a small whitewashed cellar. You sat on long wooden benches at big bare tables; a dozen people together – like a school dining-hall. On the walls were scribbled expressionist drawings involving actual newspaper clippings, real playing-cards, nailed-on beer-mats, match-boxes, cigarette cartons, and heads cut out of photographs. The café was full of students, dressed mostly with aggressive political untidiness – the men in sailor's sweaters and stained baggy trousers, the girls in ill-fitting jumpers, skirts held visibly together with safety-pins and carelessly knotted gaudy gipsy scarves. The proprietress was smoking a cigar. The boy who acted as a waiter lounged about with a cigarette between his lips and slapped customers on the back when taking their orders.

It was all thoroughly sham and gay and jolly: you couldn't help feeling at home, immediately.

Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*

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A different kind of cabaret experience. Austrian writer Joseph Roth (1894–1939) recalls stumbling into a traditional Jewish cabaret in pre-Nazi Berlin.

I stumbled upon the cabaret by chance, wandering through the dark streets on a bright evening, looking through the windows of small prayerhouses, which by day were no more than shopfronts, but in the morning and evening, houses of worship. […]

The cabaret I saw was set up in the yard of a dirty old inn. It was a rectangular, glassed-in yard, whose walls were windows, giving onto corridors and passages, revealing such domestic details as beds, shirts, and buckets. A stray linden tree stood in the middle of it, representing nature. Through one or two lit-up windows you could see inside the kitchen of a kosher restaurant. Steam rose from cauldrons. A fat woman with bare and flabby forearms wielded a wooden spoon. Directly in front of the windows and half-obscuring them was a platform from which one could go straight into the main hall of the restaurant. This platform was the stage, and in front of it sat the musicians, a troupe of six men, said to be the six sons of the great Mendel from Berdiczev, whom the oldest European Jews can still remember and whose violin playing was so beautiful that no one who heard it – in Lithuania, Volhynia, or Galicia – ever forgot it.

The actors who were about to appear went by the name of the Surokin Troupe. Surokin was their director, producer, and treasurer, a fat, clean-shaven man from Kovno who had sung as far afield as America; a cantor and tenor; star of synagogue and opera, pampered, proud, and condescending; in equal parts entrepreneur and comrade. The audience sat at small tables, eating bread and sausages and drinking beer. They went to the kitchen to fetch food and drink, enjoyed themselves, howled and laughed. They were made up of small merchants and their families, not Orthodox but "enlightened", as those Jews are called in the East who shave (even if only once a week) and wear European clothes. Those Jews observe the religious customs more out of pious habit than religious need; they think of God only when they need him, and, given their luck, they need him fairly frequently. They range from the cynical to the superstitious, but in certain situations all of them are apt to be maudlin and touching in their emotionalism. Where business is concerned they will deal with one another and with strangers with complete ruthlessness

… but one needs only to touch a certain hidden chord within them and they will be selfless, generous, and humane. Yes, they are perfectly capable of shedding tears, especially in an open-air theatre like this one.

The troupe consisted of two women and three men – but when it comes to their performance, I hardly know what to say. The entire programme was improvised. First to appear was a small, skinny fellow. […] He sang old songs and made fun of them by giving them unexpected and unsuitable twists. Then the two women sang an old song together, an actor told a funny story of Shalom Aleichem's, and at the end, Herr Surokin, the director, recited Hebrew and Yiddish poems by recent or contemporary Jewish poets; he would recite the Hebrew verses followed by the Yiddish translation, and sometimes he would sing two or three stanzas as though he were alone in his room. And then there was a deathly hush, and the little merchants made big eyes and propped their chins on their fists, and we could hear the rustling of the linden leaves.

Joseph Roth, *The Wandering Jews*
translated by Michael Hoffmann

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But it isn't just cabaret culture that pre-war Berlin is famous for. In Weimar Culture*, historian Peter Gay reminds us that it was also a vibrant centre for all the arts … classical music, painting and literature – with the publication of Thomas Mann's remarkable novel* The Magic Mountain *'the' literary event of 1924. But he also gives a vivid portrait of the seedier side of the city as it tries to grapple with spiralling inflation.*

Mann's *Zauberberg* was the literary event of 1924; in its first year, it sold fifty thousand copies – a vast number for a bulky two-volume novel in those days. And it was in the same year that another event took place, less widely publicized but equally

significant: Bertolt Brecht, already a well-known playwright, and halfway between his nihilistic and Expressionist experiments and a new cool, highly personal lyricism, moved from Munich to Berlin.

The move is significant because it symbolizes the growing power of Berlin in the golden mid-twenties. As Germany's largest city, as the capital of Prussia and the Empire, Berlin had been the only possible choice for capital of the Republic. And Berlin came to engross not merely government offices and party headquarters, but the leaders of culture, at the expense of the provinces. Other major cities like Munich, Frankfurt, or Hamburg struggled to keep excellence in their universities, took pride in special institutes, cultivated continued high quality in their theatres and liveliness in their Bohemian quarters. But Berlin was a magnet. After years of resistance, Heinrich Mann gave way and moved there. 'Centralization', he said in humorous resignation, 'is inevitable'. The city drew strength from its illustrious immigrants, and in turn gave strength to them. 'Beckmann is unthinkable without Berlin', one of his admirers noted in 1913, while, in 1920, another admirer turned the observation around: 'Beckmann', the critic Meirer-Graefe said, 'is the new Berlin.' The old Berlin had been impressive, the new Berlin was irresistible. To go to Berlin was the aspiration of the composer, the journalist, the actor; with its superb orchestras, its hundred and twenty newspapers, its forty theatres, Berlin was the place for the ambitious, the energetic, the talented. Wherever they started, it was in Berlin that they became, and Berlin that made them, famous: young Erich Kästner, who became notorious with his impudent verses before he became famous for his children's books, was fired from his post on the staff of a Leipzig newspaper and so in 1927, he recalls, he 'went off, penniless, to conquer Berlin'. […]

Berlin, it is obvious, aroused powerful emotions in everyone. It delighted most, terrified some, but left no one indifferent,

and it induced, by its vitality, a certain inclination to exaggerate what one saw. Stefan Zweig was one who projected his horror at later events onto his horror of Berlin in the time of inflation: 'Berlin', he writes, 'transformed itself into the Babel of the world.'

Bars, amusement parks, pubs shot up like mushrooms. What we had seen in Austria proved to be merely a mild and timid prelude to this witches' sabbath, for the Germans brought to perversion all their vehemence and love of system. Made-up boys with artificial waistlines promenaded along the Kurfürstendamm – and not professionals alone: every high-school student wanted to make some money, and in the darkened bars one could see high public officials and high financiers courting drunken sailors without shame. Even the Rome of Suetonius had not known orgies like the Berlin transvestite balls, where hundreds of men in women's clothes and women in men's clothes danced under the benevolent eyes of the police. Amid the general collapse of values, a kind of insanity took hold of precisely those middle-class circles which had hitherto been unshakable in their order. Young ladies proudly boasted that they were perverted; to be suspected of virginity at sixteen would have been considered a disgrace in every school in Berlin.

Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture*

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In Defying Hitler*, Sebastian Haffner pays tribute to those heroic people who took a stand against Nazism – including a cabaret master of ceremonies who wasn't afraid to use humour as a weapon against a humourless regime.*

Chance had led us to the Katakombe, and this was the second remarkable experience of the evening. We arrived at the only place in Germany where a kind of public, courageous, witty and elegant resistance was taking place. That morning I had witnessed

how the Prussian *Kammergericht*, with a tradition of hundreds of years, had ignobly capitulated before the Nazis. In the evening I experienced how a small troop of artistes, with no tradition to back them up, saved our honour with grace and glory. The *Kammergericht* had fallen but the Katakombe stood upright.

The man who led this small group of actors to victory – standing firm in the face of overwhelming, murderous odds must be counted as a victory – was called Werner Fink. This minor cabaret master of ceremonies has his place in the annals of the Third Reich, indeed one of the very few places of honour there. He did not look like a hero, and if he finally became something like one, it was in spite of himself. He was not a revolutionary actor, had no biting satire; he was not David with a sling. His character was at bottom harmless and amiable, his wit gentle, light and capricious. His jokes were based on double entendre and puns, which he handled like a virtuoso. He had invented something that could be called the hidden punch-line. Indeed, as time went by it became more and more necessary for him to hide his punch-lines, but he did not conceal his opinions. His act remained full of harmless amiability in a country where these qualities were on the liquidation list. This harmless amiability hid a kernel of real, indomitable courage. He dared to speak openly about the reality of the Nazis, and that in the middle of Germany. His patter contained references to concentration camps, the raids on people's homes, the general fear and general lies. He spoke of these things with infinitely quiet mockery, melancholy and sadness. Listening to him was extraordinarily comforting.

This 31st of March was perhaps his greatest evening. The house was full of people staring at the next day as if into an abyss. Fink made them laugh as I have never heard an audience laugh. It was dramatic laughter, the laughter of a newborn defiance, throwing off numbness and desperation, feeding off the present danger. It was a miracle that the SA had not long since

arrived to arrest everybody here. On this evening we would probably have gone on laughing in the police vans. We had been improbably raised above fear and danger.

Sebastian Haffner, *Defying Hitler*
translated by Oliver Pretzel

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From the 70s onwards, Berlin once again became famed for its pubs and clubs and cabarets. Ian Walker takes us on a night out in 80s Berlin.

'The weather was better under communism,' I said to Astrid as we reached the door to the Djungel. She rang the bell.

The same woman had been on the door at the Djungel since 1979. She wore a black leather mini-skirt. She opened the door just wide enough to get a decent view of prospective customers. Faced with strangers, she looked them up and down expressionlessly for a few seconds before making her decision. It was like facing the guards at the border except that here the dress code was stricter. To those that the girl in black leather deemed too old, too unfashionable, too poor or too fat, she shook her head and said *private* or *full*. […]

Outside the Djungel stood a small group of West German teenagers in rain-sodden pastel casuals. They had been refused admission.

Acknowledging Astrid with a miniscule movement of the eyebrows, the face-check girl opened the door and a flood of noise poured out.

'Every time I come here I swear I'll never come again,' Astrid said, picking her way through the crush till she was able to place one hand on the chrome rail of the bar. 'But where else is there to go?'

She ordered two beers from the skinhead barmaid, who looked about forty and wore a black vest. The harsh-lit bar was long and narrow and led to a small dark dancefloor.

Next to a fountain was a circular steel staircase, permanently clogged with people like bits of cork in a corkscrew. The staircase connected to a champagne bar where the richer clientele sat at white tablecloths and peered down through chrome railings to the throng below.

I met some familiar faces at the bar. A 29-year-old American called Dan briefly interrupted his conversation with the lead singer of Einstürzende Neubauten to say how you doing? Dan had come to Berlin on holiday four years ago and never gone home. He was working as a window-cleaner and still hoping to become a pop star. The lead singer of Neubauten wore a clerical collar and black coat and had a hairstyle like a palm tree. Another Sunday night regular, he was telling Dan about a forthcoming tour of Britain. Neubauten had been popular for some time in both East and West Berlin and were now beginning to attract a following among the disaffected avant garde of other cities. The band made music with industrial tools, pneumatic drills for example.

Neubauten were one of a few dozen West Berlin bands producing a form of alienated white noise known locally as Mauersound, Wallsound, the soundtrack composed in the shadow of a cliché. Mauersound was a homegrown reaction to the syncopated rhythms overlaid by Anglo-American lyrics that provided the background to public life all over West Berlin, the pop music singles flaunting cultural supremacy in a love song. The Internationale lasted three minutes and had a catchy chorus.

A dark-haired girl of about seventeen strode towards the dancefloor wearing a T-shirt that said, after the style of merchandise sold by pop groups on tour, ADOLF HITLER, EUROPEAN TOUR 1939. The list of countries which followed (Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, etc.) was written in black and red on white, the colours of the first German flag. […]

Astrid was on the dancefloor. I stood at the bar talking about nothing in particular to the window-cleaner who wanted to

be a pop star. 'Waiting For My Man' was succeeded on the turntable by 'Suffragette City'. Its author, David Bowie, a man with a green and a blue eye, had sought refuge in this town between 1976 and 1978, a period of residence which had breathed new life into the notion of decadent Berlin. Marlene Dietrich, Checkpoint Charlie, David Bowie, the jumbled-up names somehow summarised the city for the millions abroad who vaguely supposed modern Berlin was *Cabaret* plus fifty years, *Cabaret* redesigned against the glamorous backdrop of the Wall.

Ian Walker, *Zoo Station*

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Before we move on to trendy post-Wall Berlin, Rolf Schneider takes us into a good old-fashioned Berlin pub, or 'Kneipe'.

In the Berlin districts of Wedding, Prenzlauer Berg, Friedrichshain, Kreuzberg, and Neukölln there are still a few street intersections which have a pub – a *Kneipe* – on every corner, though there used to be many more. As a local saying puts it, the typical Berlin street crossing has four corners and five corner pubs.

Berlin corner pubs are Spartan institutions. Their interiors are just as uncomfortable as Vienna coffee houses are in their own way, with profoundly uncongenial interior furnishings, despite all kinds of affirmations to the contrary in song and story.

A Berlin corner *Kneipe* looks like this:

The bar is located opposite the entrance door, often positioned diagonally in the square room, and it is referred to as the "counter" in the pub visitor's vocabulary. This counter is the most important fixture of the *Kneipe*; it is the altar on which sacrifices are carried out, and from it the blessings of all religions – ecstacy and intoxication – are bestowed, produced in

this case by means of the fermented juices of malt, hops, grain, potatoes, and herbs. Any extra liquid is drained away through the holes of the counter's perforated chromium (occasionally brass) surface. A wet brush for cleaning glasses protrudes from the washing sink – an arrangement which doesn't look very hygienic. In the middle of the counter, standing like a crucifix, is the beer tap, fitted out with two spigots, one for drawing light beer and the other for strong beer. In the base of the counter there are chilling compartments for bottles of liquor. The glasses, at least those visible to the customers, are stored on a wall shelf directly behind the counter.

A really well-stocked corner *Kneipe* has a glass display case to one side of the counter holding cold *Frikadellen,* the fried balls of ground meat which are Berlin's equivalent of the meatball. Increasingly less common are the three large open glass containers set on the cabinet or on the counter itself, which contain pickles, pickled eggs and pickled herring.

In front of the counter there are between two and four stand-up tables with surfaces of pale, scrubbed wood, each with an ashtray in the middle bearing an advertising logo, and a stack of beer coasters.

In a corner *Kneipe*, there is always a poster for the next major football match hanging on a wall near the entrance. Next to the poster, framed or embossed on a wooden plaque, is a silly, sentimental saying set out in rhyming verses.

Among the glasses on the wall shelf behind the counter, a small radio sits broadcasting popular tunes, which are generally ignored by the customers.

If there is enough room, there may also be tables with seating, plus a pinball machine, slot machine, and jukebox. Sometimes there is an additional separate space with card players, a table for the regulars (identified by an appropriate metal sign), and a leather-bound menu listing standard dishes: potato salad, goulash and roast pork

The master of all this, the priest behind the counter-altar, is the proprietor, also the landlord and barman, a character who is often full-bellied and bald, a cigar-smoker, his bare arms planted on the counter surface, on his face the expression of petty, well-fed power.

The clientele is predominantly male. When women are present, they have the air of colourful birds. The men have shoved their caps back against their necks and are talking, gesticulating as they speak. They hold stinking cigarettes in their hands, they try to drown out the others. What might sound like an argument is actually not disagreement but a mixture of sanguinity and bad alcohol. The themes of the day – sport, politics, economics, private matters – are discussed using brash expressions in the barking Berliner accent. If one of the tipplers has drunk too much, to the point of staggering or picking a fight, he will be led to the door (against his protests) where a few compassionate individuals have turned up to accompany the ailing party home.

Once upon a time the corner *Kneipe* in Berlin functioned as a news exchange, centre of communications, pawn shop, and a transfer point for thieves and fences. It was the living memory of the district and a source of strength and revival. But its function changed with the decline of extreme material deprivation. Because the pub's role arose in the depths of misery, its spare furnishings befitting this poverty, it became problematic and pointless over time, with the result that it is gradually dying. Pizzerias, ice cream parlours, and bakeries are moving into its orphaned rooms. Nowadays in the city districts named above, there are many corners, four to each street crossing, which no longer have a *Kneipe* at all.

Rolf Schneider, *Berlin, ach Berlin* ('Berlin, oh Berlin')
translated by Susan Thorne

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And on to the clubbing present with Tobias Rapp.

A new Berlin is being invented here. This is neither the West Berlin of the 70s, the battleground of alternative culture that has left its signature on Ton Steine Scherben records and Seyfried comics, nor the dark Kreuzberg of the 80s, brought to global fame by the radical left, Mayday riots and the Einstürzende Neubauten; the incomparable village in the shade of the Wall that still showed the signs of the burden of history, which Sven Regener describes in his *Berlin Blues*. And it's not the East Berlin of the 90s either, the adventure playground that graduated from gaudy dancers on walls to the backdrop of the Love Parade. It's certainly not the Berlin of the Aggro rappers, the city of no mercy where everyone looks out for himself and crime lies in wait on every street corner. And it has nothing to do with the neo-Wilhelminian fantasies regularly raising their heads from soap-boxes since reunification.

This new Berlin that attracts thousands of clubbing tourists every weekend is the party capital of the Western world. It's a city where the rents are low and the authorities are extremely liberal. Where the reality principle of other cities is suspended in favour of a comprehensive lust principle. No one here really has to work – apart from on some kind of art or music projects – new clubs are opening up all the time, and you actually spend all your time at parties. That especially.

Be it Berghain or Bar 25, Tresor or Watergate – the clubs in the new party zone have made Berlin a place of pop-cultural desire. A city that convinces a lot of people that it's not everywhere that freedom has been sacrificed to security. That you can do things differently. […]

The Berghain has a number of similarities to a cathedral, not just in terms of architecture. It really is a temple to techno. And whether intentional or not, the long wait in the queue is the prelude to an initiation rite that continues with the

inevitable tingling feeling as you shuffle closer to the door. You see people being turned away ahead of you. You try to work out the criteria. It's usually fairly simple: groups of young lads always have it tough, even tougher if they're tourists, heteros or obviously drunk. But these are just probabilities. No one can help laughing when a punk isn't allowed in and shouts out a loud, 'Fuck you, Deutschland! You're a load of tossers! I'm from Vienna!'

You don't want to party with just anyone, so you don't shed a tear for any of those turned away; at the same time you pay for the exclusivity with the risk of not getting in yourself.

Identification with the tormentor mingled with excitement and fear – a whole lot of contradictory emotions come together on the way into Berghain. And it has to be that way; it's the opening tension that lifts when you finally enter the club.

The initiation rite continues with the careful drug check you pass through in the lobby – a ritual cleansing. After that you make your offering, another religious act. Only to land up in the cloakroom, a huge room dotted with sofas and dominated by a giant mural by the Polish artist Piotr Nathan. It's called 'Rituals of Disappearance'. The light architecture underlines the feeling of an initiation: it's dark outside, dimly lit in the lobby, bright in the cloakroom. Once you've stepped over the final threshold and entered the large hall from which you've already heard thumping beats, it suddenly goes dark again. You cross the room, walk up the large steel staircase, and even if you know what you're letting yourself in for in the hours to come, it's always a brief shock to stand by the dancefloor, shrieked at by the music. For a few seconds until your eyes have adapted to the flashing strobes, you stumble around half blind. It's not unlike a slap in the face – not only do you have to shove your way more or less sober through a mass of sweating bodies that have all been here a few hours. The sound waves of the music assault you physically too.