

New Book in the Bag to Berlin

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Opinion

Berlin is a major tourist destination, a world city with a dramatic history. Many shelf meters have been written about it, not least combinations of travel guide and history book. The latest contribution of this kind is John Kampfner's *In Search of Berlin: The Story of a Reinvented City* (London: Atlantic Books 2023, 400 pages). Kampfner is a British author, journalist and documentary maker with a long relationship to Berlin, originally as a correspondent in East Berlin. In recent years he has covered many miles on the streets of Berlin and spent many hours drawing information from his wide network in the city.

Kampfner tells Berlin's 800-year-old story from the beginning and describes the remnants from each epoch. He thus works as an inverted archeologist, beginning in the bottom layer and working his way up to uncover buildings, monuments, tombstones and artefacts in museums and exhibitions. This approach is hardly original but rather standard design. How successful it will be depends upon the author's knowledge and writing talent. Kampfner is no doubt well equipped in both these respects. As a Swede, it has been natural for me to compare Kampfner's work with two excellent Swedish books, Folke Schimanski's *Berlin: En stads historia* (Berlin: The history of a city; Lund: Historiska Media 2010, 384 pages) and Jan Mosander's *Berlin: Med en guide till stadens nazistiska och kommunistiska historia* (Berlin: With a guide to the city's Nazi and Communist history; Stockholm: Lind & Co 2023, 440 pages).

These three books show similarities as well as differences. All three authors have lifelong relations to the city. Schimanski was born in Berlin, Mosander and Kampfner came there as young correspondents. Schimanski and Kampfner have the long historical perspective in common. Mosander and Kampfner have the journalist touch in common; they move around the city freely, they observe and interview. To summarize: Kampfner is situated in between Schimanski and Mosander by combining the historical perspective with journalistic excursions.

It is not in a short review possible to dive into the mass of information assembled in a 400-page book. I will therefore focus only on a few attractions which arise from Berlin's 20th century history without being very well-known and much visited.

The exhibition *Mythus Germania* is not mentioned by Schimanski and Mosander, although they both of course tell about Albert Speer's plan for Berlin as the capitol of the German thousand year empire. The exhibition is denoted by Kampfner (p. 231) as "a hidden gem". And that's what it is. It is hidden away in the subway entrance *Gesundbrunnen* in north Berlin and open only on Saturdays. The megalomaniac impression of this architectural construction is stunning, not least as regards the giant dome in which Hitler was supposed to rant in front of 180,000 listeners. In comparison to this dome other dominant city buildings like *Brandenburger Tor*, the old Royal Palace (now reconstructed as *Humboldt Forum*) and the *TV Tower* seem like insignificant miniatures. The *Germania* model was made for the movie *Der Untergang* from 2004.

A monument related to Speer's model is the *Schwerbelastungskörper* ('Naziklotz'), a 13,000 tonnes lump of concrete which Kampfner (p. 232) denotes as "both easy to miss and impossible to miss" in all its "striking ugliness". Its purpose was to test whether Berlin's ground could support buildings of the magnitude that were planned for *Germania*.

Another attraction (mentioned by Schimanski but not by Mosander) is *Teufelsberg* in the *Grunewald* area. As Kampfner tells (p. 248), "for the best part of twenty years, up to 800 trucks a day unloaded so much rubble on top of it that it became West Berlin's highest peak". On this mountain a US listening station was established during the Cold War. The Americans abandoned the facility after the German reunification. Nowadays one can visit the station to admire graffiti art and a captivating view of Berlin.

Finally, some curiosities from Kampfner's historical reporting

During the Thirty Years War, a ploy by Swedish troops was (p. 51) "to sprinkle gunpowder on children and set them alight in front of their parents". Another amusement was to pour excrement down the throats of people and then trample on their bellies. The German royalty had some idiosyncrasies. The 'Soldier King' Friedrich Wilhelm I (1688-1740) was so obsessed with hunting (p. 78) "that he was known to have fired around 600 shots a day". In one year, 1729, he killed 3,600 boars. Friedrich the Great (1712-1786) was a great music lover (p. 96): "It is said he played the flute so much that his teeth eventually fell out." Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859-1941) spoke of the Reichstag building, inaugurated in 1894, as 'the imperial monkey house', and visited it only twice.

During the early industrialization life expectancy for men was 30 years for men in the poorest parts of the city and 26 years

for women working in sewing sweatshops. Berlin's population doubled from two to four million between 1890 and 1914, when the population density was twice that of Tokyo. Already at the turn of the century 1900, Berlin suffered from traffic infarct, particularly at Potsdamer Platz. Kampfner claims 170,000 cars an hour crossed the intersection, which seems impossible. Here the first traffic light in Europe was installed in 1924. In the 1920s Berlin was a city of commerce and pleasure. At the parade street Unter den Linden (p. 189) "there were nineteen travel agents, six banks, eighteen car dealers, seventeen jewellers, fifteen fashion stores, thirteen tobacconists, five cafes, four restaurants". The city harboured 160 gay bars and, believe it or not, about 85,000 lesbians. Marlene Dietrich, when in America, famously sang "Ich hab' noch ein Koffer in Berlin" (and, finally, she had her grave there).

So, why not pack Kampfner's book in your bag next time you are heading for Berlin!



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