



Witness to the Wars and the Walls

A DAY IN BERLIN

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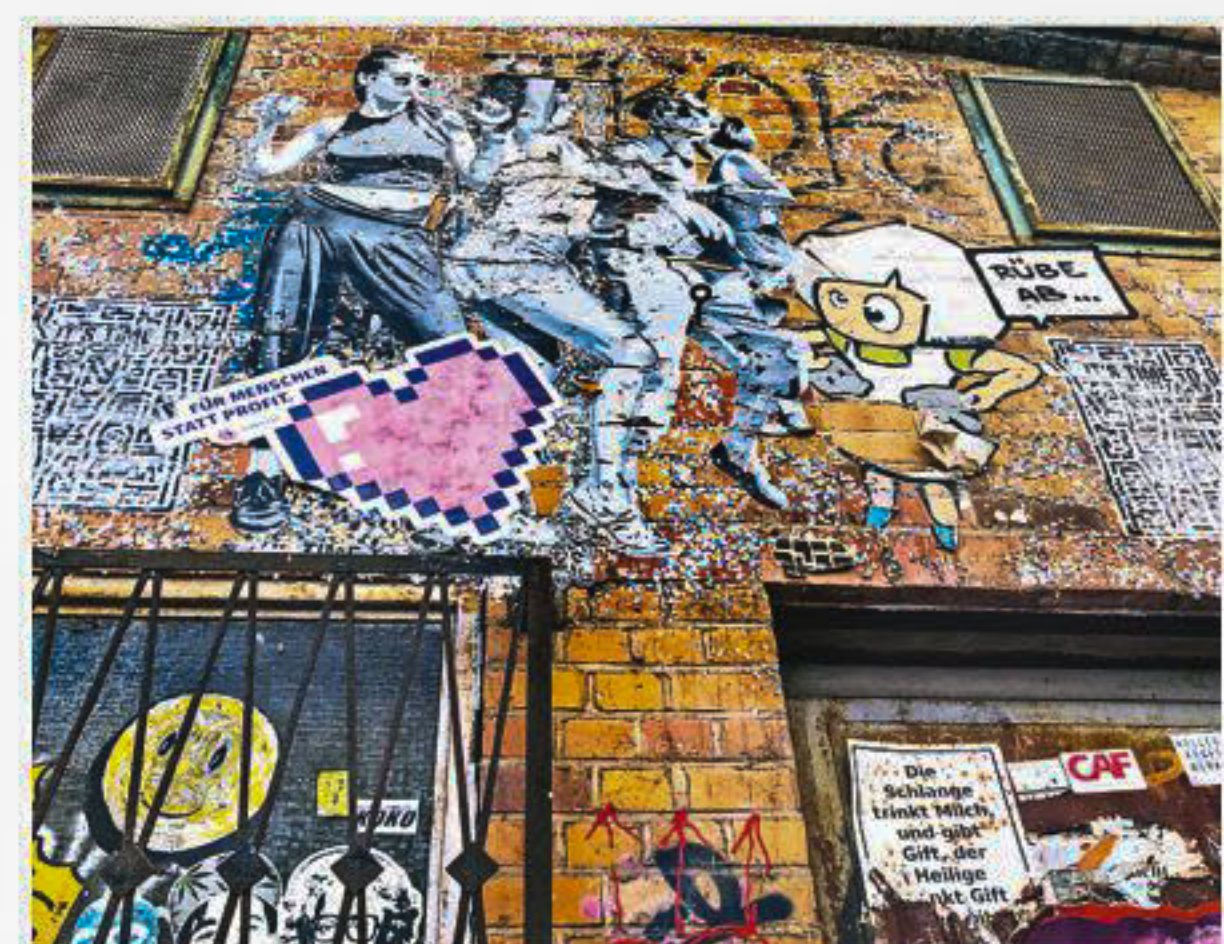
If you are arriving in Berlin from a more pristine, more conventionally “charming” tourist city, prepare to be shocked. Berlin is filthier than Amsterdam, less organised than Vienna, less flamboyant than Budapest. Even compared to its German counterparts, Berlin is much poorer as a city. In fact, luxury tourism is not Berlin’s strong suit. It’s the destruction, struggle and constant refurbishment of uncomfortable history that make Berlin stand out in your happy-go-lucky European touristy routine.

Berlin is ever-changing. A lot of its

major infrastructures such as the City Palace and the Berlin Cathedral are being renovated. A few decades have gone by after the Fall of the Wall, and many have passed since the War, but this city has not stopped going through makeovers. However, the renovations are somewhat to the dismay of the Berliners, who have always been reluctant to accept the potential coverup or rewriting of history, no matter how ruthless or uncomfortable it is.

I joined a guided tour starting from the Oberbaum Bridge, the river Spree flowing diligently beneath us, Berlin TV Tower and the Berlin Cathedral visible in the vicinity. Had the feeble afternoon sun shone directly on the stainless-steel dome of the TV Tower, the sunlight would have reflected in the form of a cross over Berlin, a phenomenon the locals like to call the Pope’s Revenge. The TV Tower, which was the architectural magnum opus of Socialist Germany, was supposed to be a secular and communist symbol but has become the butt of an anti-communist joke due to the enmity between communism and religion.

We stopped at Bebelplatz, a public square close to Humboldt University. The Square now stands as a witness to one of the many notorious Nazi book-burning ceremonies which were carried out in German universities by the nationalist German Student Association in May 1933. In the middle of the stony square, there is a carefully pinned-down piece of glass. Peeking through the glass, I could see a library full of eerie, empty shelves



underneath the floor—the ghosts of burned down history and knowledge. It’s a memorial dedicated to the sad demise of the ‘Un-German’ books. I tried to see Bebelplatz through the eyes of the fictional nine-year-old Liesel Meminger from Markus Zusak’s novel *The Book Thief*, who was made to witness the Nazi book burning. Until Berlin, that book was the closest connections I had to the War.

Near Bebelplatz is Neue Wache, a building that serves as a memorial for victims of war and dictatorship. It houses the popular Käthe Kollwitz sculpture ‘Mother and Her Dead Son’—undoubtedly an echo of Kollwitz’s own tragedy, having lost her son to the First World War. The statue sits right under an oculus (a hole in the ceiling), so that the unadulterated Berlin rain, sun, snow or cold may pour through it onto the statue, as it once did on the civilians during the War.

On August 13, 1961, East Berliners woke up to find barbed wire fencing along



PHOTO: AFP