

The Prize

Beneath the blanket bombings of its wars, the twentieth century has witnessed whole cities disappear. Their names have become metaphors of obliteration, standing for the techniques of destruction of the time and a readiness to employ those techniques against civilian targets. Guernica, lying on the periphery of Europe and at the perimeter of World War II, was the prelude. The bombardment of April 1937 transformed this previously unknown provincial Spanish city into a worldwide symbol of terror. In May 1940 Rotterdam became the first large well-known European city to find its name imbued with new meaning through its destruction. With the bombing of Coventry—and the German term derived from it, *coventrisieren*, “to coventrize”—a new technology of annihilation had developed to the point where the many cities wiped out in its wake remained nameless. Not until the end of the war, with the fall of the cultural center Dresden, did a city name with symbolic significance once again emerge. Dresden became the metaphor for the most advanced “conventional” techniques of destruction, as this military practice would henceforth be termed. It seems almost inevitable that atomic technology claimed as its first victim a place as obscure as Guernica had been in its time. Only in its destruction did Hiroshima assume international stature.

And as for Berlin? The capital of the German Reich absorbed more bombs and shells in World War II than any other metropolis. Of the scale of the wreckage, of that mass of resulting rubble, there are but

rough estimates, fluctuating between 55 and 100 million cubic meters. Assuming an average figure of 80 million cubic meters, and given a post-war population of 3 million, there were 26 cubic meters of debris for each Berliner. The title of a study published three decades later made clear the consequences this had on the city's appearance: *The Anthropogenically Conditioned Transformation of the Cityscape through Deposits of Debris in Berlin (West)*.¹

Though at the forefront of the European inferno, Berlin was never seen as a victim of bombing. The fact that surface bombings, having already become a matter of routine and deadening habit, reached their real peak in the years 1943–45 provides some explanation for this. Significant as well was the psychological fact that the capital of a state waging war is always considered apart from its cities of art, industry, and trade. In the first half of the twentieth century the adversaries were in full agreement with the idea that a capital city was less a civilian construct than the symbol of a nation's power.

They were equally united in the conclusion that the enemy whose defeat had in the past been symbolized by the seizure of his capital could now be crushed through the flattening of his capital. At the beginning of World War I, the destruction of London and Berlin by zeppelin bombardments was a fantasy equally and mutually popular in Great Britain and Germany. As the behavior of London's inhabitants demonstrated during the German air raids of 1940–41, this attitude was evident even in those directly affected: they reacted as soldiers in a warlike bulwark, not as defenseless victims. One could interpret Brecht's aphorism—"Berlin: an etching of Churchill's according to an idea of Hitler's"*—as the destruction of the capital in order to make an example of it. Or as the British Director of Bomber Operations put it on the eve of the last great wave of attacks on Berlin: "The complete devastation of the center of such an enormously large city as Berlin would lay before the entire world an irrefutable proof of the power of a modern military force armed with bombers. . . . Were Allied troops able to occupy Berlin, or were the city held by a neutral party, it would witness a lasting monument to the efficacy which strategic bombardment has made possible in this war and can, at any given time, repeat."²

The site of this efficacy became a principal stop on the grand tour that led Allied politicians and journalists to Germany in the years right

*Brecht's phrase operates on an untranslatable German pun. *Radierung*, "etching," also means "erasure."

after the war. However, the impression anticipated by the Allied bomber commando did not fully materialize. The power of destruction that had here performed its work proved less stirring than the sight itself of what had been destroyed. For the visitor passing through the still largely intact outlying districts and approaching the formerly pulsing city center between the Tiergarten and Alexanderplatz, it was, as Churchill's niece Clarissa wrote, "as if . . . reaching a different climatic zone, a mountain top where no living thing can survive and the vegetation gradually thins out and ceases."³ From the plane carrying him from Nuremberg to Berlin in July 1947, Albert Speer, who at Hitler's request had planned and in part begun a massive reconstruction of this area, saw the edifice of the New Chancellery below. "It was still there, although damaged by several direct hits," he noted after his arrival at the prison in Spandau.⁴ Others saw it differently, among them the English poet Stephen Spender, who the year before had visited what remained of the government quarter:

The Reichstag and the Chancellery are already sights for sightseers, as they might well be in another five hundred years. They are scenes of a collapse so complete that it already has the remoteness of all final disasters which make a dramatic and ghostly impression whilst at the same time withdrawing their secrets and leaving everything to the imagination. The last days of Berlin are as much matters for speculation as the last days of an empire in some remote epoch: one goes to the ruins with the same sense of wonder, the same straining of the imagination, as one goes to the Colosseum at Rome.⁵

What Speer had attempted at the height of his architectural career was strangely subverted by what Stephen Spender and other visitors to Berlin saw. For Speer's "ruins theory" (at least as he explained it afterward in his memoirs) was nothing other than an architecture that anticipated its continuation in decay. Assuming that modern industrial materials and techniques would not produce buildings like those of the Ancients, which decayed in dignity, Speer chose the same heroic materials, such as granite and porphyry. ("By using special materials and by applying certain principles of statics, we should be able to build structures which even in the state of decay, after hundreds or [such was our reckoning] thousands of years would more or less resemble Roman models. To illustrate my ideas I had a romantic drawing prepared. It showed what the reviewing stand on the Zeppelin Field would look like after generations of neglect, overgrown by ivy, its columns fallen, the walls crumbling here and there, but the outlines still clearly recognizable.")⁶

The condition of the New Chancellery in 1945 revealed Speer's ruins theory as too traditional in its exclusive focus on a decay caused by time to account for a decay now accelerated by bombardment and artillery fire. On the other hand, statements like Spender's verify that it was possible to see the modern form of war ruins in a classical manner: as an image of fallen power, of shattered greatness and humbled arrogance, the image that had fascinated historians from Herodotus to Gibbon. However, not everyone saw Berlin's expanse of ruins in such neatly historical terms as Spender. For the American journalist William Shirer, who had last witnessed Berlin at the height of Nazi power, it possessed neither greatness nor tragedy. It was nothing more than a mass of "obscene ruins," in which the "indecent" of defeated power showed itself for a final time. "How can one find words to convey truthfully and accurately the picture of a great capital destroyed almost beyond recognition; of a once almighty nation that ceased to exist; of a conquering people who were so brutally arrogant and so blindly sure of their mission as the master race when I departed from here five years ago, and whom you now see poking about their ruins, broken, dazed, shivering, hungry human beings without will or purpose or direction."⁷

In visual terms, Berlin's fields of ruins offered a different sight than cities in the west of Germany that had experienced a similar devastation. The city was, as Isaac Deutscher said, "not 'leveled,' it stands upright in front of the observer to a truly astonishing degree."⁸ It is inviting to see the image of the capital, confronting the observer almost defiantly even in its destruction, as a projection of the Reich. And yet there lay in the construction materials and techniques a real explanation for Berlin's uprightness. Because of their medieval—that is, largely wooden—structures, historic city centers in the west and south of Germany burned down to enormous heaps of ashes, leaving behind empty expanses. Berlin, however, was a product of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, erected in large part by a method of construction using steel frames; even the conventionally built buildings from the baroque through Wilhelminian Germany were of such massiveness that, though burned out, they remained standing. Because of its technical modernity the capital of the Reich was never thought to have the historic, monumental, or aesthetic qualities of cities like Dresden, Munich, Cologne, and Nuremberg. To adherents of traditional artistic and architectural urban ideals, Berlin seemed ever less a city and increasingly an urban machine. Wilhelm Hausenstein in 1932 called it "baseless," "ground-

less,” “a vacuum”—not because of any lack of architectonic substance (“Old Berlin, the Berlin of the palace area, has verdigris roofs as good as those of baroque Dresden”), but because its essence, its identity rested in something different. Berlin was a new kind of city; its technological modernity did not function as a superficial addition to what already existed but was the capital’s very essence and substance. In the 1920s, any representative of *Neue Sachlichkeit* would have agreed with the traditionalist Hausenstein in calling Berlin “a nothingness elevated to quintessence,” saying of it that “automobiles, traffic, and light bulbs in Berlin constitute a disproportionate and almost romantic addition . . . because the vacuum of Berlin is so large.”⁹ Berlin, the most technological, modern, and “American” metropolis in Europe of the 1920s, was also more “modern” in its destruction than the historical cities in western and southern Germany. That it was not seen as a victim like Dresden is attributable to the fact that here, so to speak, the most modern technologies of production and destruction collided, in a kind of self-destruction of technology, a duel it carried out with itself. In his first visit to the destroyed city, Alfred Döblin, who in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* described Franz Biberkopf’s struggle against this urban machine, saw its ruins as the result of a struggle that the city and fleets of bombers had fought out with each other. “Images of a terrible devastation, of immeasurable boundless destruction,” he noted. “It almost no longer has the character of reality. It is an improbable nightmare in broad daylight. The city must have gotten itself into a horrible struggle in the darkness.”¹⁰

A struggle against Berlin, a struggle in Berlin, a struggle for Berlin: as a real warrior in this theater, and entering the fray at about the same time as the fictitious Franz Biberkopf, Joseph Goebbels also deserves mention. His book about the buildup of the Nazi organization in the city was titled *Ein Kampf um Berlin* (a struggle for Berlin). He remained personally bound to this city—to the very city considered the least Nazi of all German cities—until his death. He had a love-hate relationship with Berlin and learned to heed its lessons. “Till then [the mid-1920s] the city of Berlin,” he wrote in *Ein Kampf um Berlin*,

was for me a sealed book in terms of its politics and its population. I knew it only from occasional visits, and it always appeared as a dark, mysterious secret to me, as an urban monster of stone and asphalt that for the most part I would have preferred to leave rather than enter. You get to know Berlin only after living there for several years. Then that dark mysterious quality of

this sphinxlike city suddenly unfolds. . . . I came from the provinces and was still fully trapped in provincial thinking. The multitude was for me merely a dark monster, and I myself was not possessed of the will to conquer and master it. Without that one cannot last long in Berlin. . . . Whoever wants to become something here must speak the language the crowd understands. . . . Of necessity I developed an entirely new style of political speech under these rash impressions. . . . It was the same for all the agitators of the Berlin movement. . . . A new inflammatory language was spoken here that no longer had anything to do with antiquated, so-called *völkisch* forms of expression. The National Socialist agitation was tailored to the masses. The modern outlook of the party sought and found here a new style capable of sweeping people away.¹¹

The irony of history: Was it this city, the most modern and technological, the least National Socialist city in Germany, which in every fiber embodied the “asphalt civilization” whose destruction was the goal of the Nazi party—was it this very city that modernized the party, thereby making possible its success and victory? Goebbels’s book was called *Ein Kampf um Berlin* not only in reference to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. The struggle, in Goebbels’s terminology, for the submission of the “urban monster” Berlin and its transformation into a party-run machine was also intended. For the Nazis, Berlin was battlefield, enemy, prize, and booty in one. For a nation in civil war, the capital city always represents this; yet Berlin in the twentieth century was more than just the capital of a nation in civil war. If the more recent view that the two world wars begun by Germany were a single worldwide civil war is to be heeded, then Berlin was its capital, its enemy, the prize, and the spoils, within the compass not merely of a nation but of the entire world. The Allies’ degree of concern over the capital of the Reich was manifest in their plans for its conquest and occupation.

The victor’s entry into the capital, though not generally the closing act to the wars of the past, has always been considered the true consummation of victory. This question becomes more complex when a coalition, not a single victor, is concerned. Because coalitions often fall apart in less time than it takes their common enemy to collapse, each member tries—even as the final battle is being fought—to secure its booty, whether unilaterally or in new alliances, as changing circumstances dictate. None of the war alliances of the last two centuries resulted in the joint occupation and rule of an enemy capital. Even Paris, occupied in 1814–15 by English, Prussian, Austrian, and Russian troops, offered no exception: this was a short-term, strictly military occupation,

without the assumption of administrative or governmental functions. No thought was given to partitioning the city into sectors for the allied powers.

Jerusalem in the twelfth century stands as a more distant example of such a partitioning. Collectively conquered by the first Crusade coalition and declared the seat of the Latin Kingdom, it was without a doubt an “internationally” occupied and ruled city. However, there was no modern administration tidily divided into sectors according to nation; there arose instead a new ruling class composed of a disorderly mixture of medieval entourages living next to and with each other.

A third example of an international occupation is offered by the International Zone of Shanghai formed by France, Great Britain, and the United States in the nineteenth century. It was to this situation, in fact, that the one in Berlin has been often compared since 1945. But unjustly so, for the International Zone represented only a small part of Shanghai, being in essence nothing other than a European enclave, and in no way the result of a previous conquest.

The conquest, occupation, partition, and divided joint rule of Berlin by the Allies was historically unique, not comparable to any of these precedents, yet uniting essential elements of each. Like Paris in 1814–15, Berlin was the capital of the defeated world enemy. Like the International Zone in Shanghai, it was ruled internationally over an extended period of time. And like Jerusalem for the High Middle Ages, Berlin was of almost mythological significance for the twentieth century’s idea of a world revolution and its real world wars. To have Berlin, and consequently Germany, was—according to the horizon of expectations opened with the October Revolution—to have Europe. The Russian Revolution was only an initial spark, a prelude to the real world revolution emanating out of—and unthinkable without—Berlin. In the years between 1917 and 1923, this *idée fixe* occupied so firm a position in the minds of the revolutionary generation that it most likely never fully disappeared until 1945. Stalin’s salute to the German Communist Party (KPD) in 1923 was of course propaganda (“The victory of the German proletariat will undoubtedly transfer the center of the world revolution from Moscow to Berlin”),¹² but like all effective propaganda, it played upon a reality of the most fanciful ideas. The polarization of the world after 1945 stripped Berlin of both its position and its aura. This downfall, taking place in the three years of Allied postwar occupation, has the closed and self-referential quality of great drama. Berlin furnished the unities of time, place, and action.

The decision to occupy and rule Berlin jointly was made in London in the fall of 1944 by the Allied European Advisory Commission responsible for postwar planning. It was also decided that the city, partitioned into sectors, would lie in the middle of the future Russian zone of occupation, as would the American enclave of Bremen within the British zone. This arrangement, which at first glance appeared unnecessarily complicated, was the result of a careful weighing of Germany's economic, demographic, and geographical resources. Because the greatest concentration of population and economic power lay in the west, the Russian zone received a disproportionately large surface area. But this did not mean that Berlin would have to lie in the middle of this eastern zone. It was possible to draw a border that made the Reich's capital the border city of these zones. Roosevelt must have conceived of such a solution when he first studied the problem on the way to the Tehran Conference in 1943. He drew a borderline between the American and Russian zones running from Stettin (Szczecin) through Berlin to Leipzig, leaving no doubt that Berlin was to lie on the westward side of this line. ("We should go as far as Berlin. The Soviets could then take the territory to the east thereof. The United States should have Berlin.")¹³ A similar suggestion was still under discussion in the deliberations of the European Advisory Commission. It came from James W. Riddleberger of the American State Department. According to this plan, Berlin was supposed to lie at the point of intersection of the three Allied zones (a French zone had not yet been thought of), at approximately the center of the German pie cut into three segments. Proceeding from Potsdamer Platz, the American, Russian, and British sectors of Berlin would have expanded outward in a funnel- or wedge-shaped manner, continuing into the hinterland of their respective zones. However, the cartographically clear and geometrically elegant solution had no chance of realization. Given the traditional administrative borders and economic and commercial spheres, it was utopian.

Whatever the details of the plans for partition, the fact that Berlin commanded the Allies' collective attention despite so many adverse circumstances showed that for them the capital of the Reich was a place that no one power was willing to relinquish entirely to any other. Berlin was clearly the trophy of World War II, and plans for its divided joint rule were an attempt to establish a balance of the victorious powers resulting from the suppression of the common enemy. Like heirs coming together in the house of the deceased warily to oversee the division of

goods, the victorious powers planned to convene in the capital, Germany's former center—and now vacuum—of power.

When these decisions were made in the fall of 1944, the end of the war was in sight, though it was not clear exactly how and when that would occur. As the circle tightened around Germany, the Allies were able to calculate their gains and losses for the last phase of the struggle. For the British and Americans in the west and the Russians in the east, there were two options. Either their own armies conquered all (or the greatest part) of Germany, with no consideration of casualties. Or, conversely, their allied counterparts would be given precedence.

In the latter case casualties (but likewise profits) in Germany would be minimized. The European Advisory Commission's plan for division represented a compromise. In the event that the Red Army reached the Rhine—considered probable in American military circles six months before the end of the war—the Western powers were guaranteed their portion of Germany and Berlin. And in the case of an advance of the Western powers toward the east—which in fact happened in the spring of 1945—the Russians were given the corresponding guarantee. Drawing borders was a measure of reciprocal security against extreme shifts of balance arising from the incalculable fortunes of war. It arose from the same sober weighing of interests and avoidance of unwageable risks, from the same conservative global politics with which the two world powers would assure and control each other during the decades of the Cold War. For forty-five years Berlin would serve as the needle on the scale of this balance. But in the spring of 1945, the city was briefly at the center of a calculation aimed at the imbalance of one side. This happened in the weeks of the unexpectedly rapid advance of the British and Americans and the still unexplained two-month standstill of the Red Army at the Oder. Suddenly what Roosevelt had hoped for two years before—the conquest of Germany up to the Oder and the occupation of Berlin by the Western powers—seemed palpably near. Churchill pressed Roosevelt to seize the opportunity. The decisive lines in the two telegrams he sent to Washington on March 31 and April 1 of 1945 read: "Why should we not cross the Elbe and advance as far eastward as possible? This has an important political bearing, as the Russian armies of the South seem certain to enter Vienna and overrun Austria. If we deliberately leave Berlin to them, even if it should be in our grasp, the double event may strengthen their conviction, already apparent, that they have done everything" (March 31, 1945). And, resuming

and intensifying his argument the next day: "If they [the Russians] . . . take Berlin, will not their impression that they have been the overwhelming contributor to our common victory be unduly imprinted in their minds, and may this not lead them into a mood which will raise grave and formidable difficulties in the future? I therefore consider that from a political standpoint we should march as far east into Germany as possible, and that should Berlin be in our grasp we should certainly take it."¹⁴ Roosevelt, for whom Berlin was meanwhile no longer a political but a purely military goal, left the decision to General Eisenhower. The latter's refusal to conquer the capital of the Reich was characterized by Robert Murphy, an American diplomat later serving in Berlin, as "a decision of such international significance that no Army chief should have been required to make it."¹⁵

The global political consequences of Eisenhower's decision, however much they might invite speculation, can hardly be grasped. The consequences for Berlin, however, were clear: the Russians were the conquerors and sole masters of the city for two decisive months. They made the personnel and political decisions about the structuring of the administration, the admission of parties and unions, the arrangement of educational and judiciary systems, about the restimulation or dismantling of industry, the repair of transportation systems—in brief, about everything that started the urban machine going again. When the Allies entered Berlin after this two-month lapse to take possession of their sectors, their situation was that of guests received by the master of the house. To be sure, they had legal claims and a contractual assurance of quarters. The American advance unit that entered Berlin on July 1, 1945, found out how little that meant in practical terms, though. Its commander later offered a description of this arrival:

With no billets to go to, we wound up in the Grunewald, that great forest park in the southwestern area of the city. We had to set up pup tents in the mud and rain, and crawl into them for the night . . . I had managed to avoid pup tents throughout World War II, yet here I was, with the war over and making a triumphal entry into Berlin, established in that dreaded form of shelter under most dreary and uncomfortable conditions. This was undoubtedly history's most unimpressive entry into the capital of a defeated nation by a conquering power.¹⁶

For the subsequent forces of the Western Allies the situation was no longer so extreme; yet soon they too noticed, and in a more far-reaching way, what it meant to move into a house appointed without their collaboration.

The house set up by the Russians also contained a floor for art and intellectual life. As in the other rooms, here too the accommodations consisted of what was available—that is, of what remained after the war and the collapse, and, going back even further, of what remained after the Nazi *Gleichschaltung* (razing or leveling) of culture. The question, then, is how much of the artistic and intellectual life of Berlin before 1933 had survived to the spring of 1945.

1930: YEAR OF CRISIS

The image of Berlin's physical destruction in 1945 is typically associated with the cultural destruction of the twelve previous years: what had begun with book burnings, prescriptions, banishment, imprisonment, and murder found its horrifying conclusion in the massive collective devastation of the city. According to this view, artistic and intellectual life was in full bloom when it was destroyed on January 30, 1933, as though by a sudden frost. In the theaters, Brecht, Piscator, Jessner, Fehling, and Gründgens had set the tone; in the concert halls, the avant-garde was represented by Schoenberg, Hindemith, Alban Berg, Kurt Weill, and Hanns Eisler, and classicism by Bruno Walter and Wilhelm Furtwängler. In the feuilleton sections of newspapers, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Herbert Ihering, and other critics dissected cultural activity with razor-sharp precision; analysis of political events issued from the pens of Carl von Ossietzky, Leopold Schwarzschild, and Theodor Wolff. In Berlin's "red" district of Wedding, Ernst Busch blared poetic-proletarian battle songs in the streets. In Dahlem, Albert Einstein expanded the borders of modern physics. In their studios, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Erich Mendelsohn, the Taut brothers, and others designed houses and housing developments that were soon to enter the textbooks of modern architecture and urban planning. Berlin was the laboratory of modernity, a city in which (according to a Brechtian poem) intellectuals eulogized oil tanks while writing sarcastic sonnets about intellectuals worshipping oil tanks.

Recently cultural historians have expressed doubt about the idea that this blooming culture perished—that is, was destroyed by the Nazis—instantaneously, as though submerged under a sudden deluge. The *Gleichschaltung* of the culture of the Weimar period was, of course, violent and sudden. Yet the scene that ended so abruptly in 1933 was no longer what it had been at the end of the 1920s. Truly modern intellectual life in Berlin, so open to experiment, and in art and spirit so radical, had

already changed in the years before 1933. The “international experimental downturn” (H. D. Schäfer)¹⁷ that became visible in the crisis year of 1930 meant for Berlin revising the revolution of 1918–19. That same year Herbert Ihering described the change, which he called a “cultural reaction,” as a *fait accompli*: “The turn occurred gradually. The omens altered imperceptibly. Invisibly ideas were rearranged. It was nothing other than a slow and cautious change of climate. A new season with all its seductive transitions was announced. It seeped pleasantly into every pore. Resistance grew weaker and weaker. A tepid warmth. An intellectual Capua.”¹⁸ Of course, not everyone partook in the new mood of 1930. The situation was like that of half a century later when another postmodern shift to “the new lethargy, the new sentimentality, the new reaction” (Ihering) would also lead to polarization, antagonism, and partisanship where before consent had ruled. Intellectual encampments, which were to find their continuation in the real camps built after 1933, had been set up by 1930.

This development was not restricted to Berlin, but it was here that it took its most decisive form. As, for example, in the writers’ national association *Schutzverband Deutscher Schriftsteller*, whose local Berlin chapter was the largest in the Reich. Even before 1930, a majority had formed here anxious to see in the *Schutzverband* not merely a forum for professional representation but an organization vigorously engaged in politics (though not party politics). It thereby stood in opposition to the *Schutzverband*’s national board of directors, also residing in Berlin, which insisted on strict political abstinence. Disputes, confrontations, and the expulsion of several members by the board resulted. In 1931, when the majority of the Berlin members declared solidarity with those expelled, the board dissolved the Berlin chapter. It was a coup de main that had its political counterpart in the deposition of the Prussian state government in 1932 by Papen’s national government. Openly supported by all liberal colleagues of note, the Berlin group could ignore its dissolution and continue on as though nothing had happened. Consequently, the board of directors established a rival organization in Berlin. Up until the general *Gleichschaltung* in 1933, there were two national writers’ associations in Berlin. The first cultural fissure had occurred. The second, between the liberal-democratic and conservative-national members of the Literature Division of the Prussian Academy of the Arts, transpired almost at the same time. Here the conservatives, who found themselves in the minority, simply quit the field: they left the

academy. As is well known, the leftist-bourgeois group under the leadership of Heinrich Mann and Alfred Döblin did not last for long.

Such institutional polarizations were carried out more visibly than those in works of art. Writers personally in support of politicizing their association or the academy embraced Ihering's so-called change of climate in their work. If in the 1920s they had been fascinated by the metropolis, asphalt, oil tanks, and the soul in the age of its technical manipulability, they were now more interested in the past than in the present, more in myth than in technology. "Instead of 'scientists,' 'engineers,' or 'agitators,' writers now understood themselves as . . . 'prophet,' 'priest,' 'guide,' or 'adviser'" (H. D. Schäfer).¹⁹

The intellectual life in Berlin that passed into the Nazis' hands in 1933 was no longer the laboratory of modernity but merely the burned-out husk of the period 1918–29. One might imagine how Berlin of the Weimar period, without the violent disruption of the Nazis, might have entered cultural history.* Once exhausted, periods of cultural flowering in urban centers usually find a peaceful end. Like Paris and Petersburg in the nineteenth century or Paris, New York, and London in the decades after 1945, they quietly return to normality. Without the thunderclap of 1933, cultural life in Berlin, much of which had already withered, would have likewise undramatically faded away. But with it, that culture was transfixed as the dramatic image of the fall of an intellectual Pompeii. Since then, Berlin of the Weimar period (as American cultural history has it) has been the familiar metaphor for the culture of modernity poised, like Damocles, beneath the sword of reaction and barbarism. In this romanticizing and mythologizing of culture one might detect a variant of Speer's theory of ruins: ruined (despised, forbidden, banished, murdered) by the Nazis, the Berlin intelligentsia of 1933 continues to live on in intellectual mythology as the unique generation of intellectuals who were granted a duel with real power, and romantic defeat. This myth became international as Berlin's culture spread with the

*In addition to intellectual change of climate, there were signs around 1930 that Berlin's creative limits had also been reached. Several great artists and minds had left the city and the country for a longer period or for good, seeing more promise elsewhere. After 1929 Albert Einstein spent more time abroad than in Berlin, and in 1932 he accepted an invitation from the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. Hollywood lured away the top names in German film: Murnau, Lubitsch, Marlene Dietrich, Elisabeth Bergner. A small colony of Berlin intellectuals arose in Paris; its most prominent members included Tucholsky, Benjamin, and Rudolf Leonhard. George Grosz left Berlin in January 1933. It was not a general migration, but a noticeable trickle, as is often to be observed before the floodgates are lifted.

banishment from its native soil. Einstein, Grosz, Hindemith, Gropius, Schoenberg, Lang—all ceased to be names confined to Berlin or even Germany. They became international images, and with them Berlin became the global metaphor for modern high culture at the gates of barbarism.

That, however, was a later development. In the Berlin of 1945 there was no sense for such considerations. Berliners had as little historical distance from the period that had preceded the Third Reich as they had taste for their destroyed city as an antique field of ruins. The time before 1933 belonged indisputably to a past world, yet at the same time it also represented, as the last stop before the descent into barbarism, the only possible orientation for rebuilding. Progress had continued in New York and other places spared from fascism and Stalinism, and what had been modern at the beginning of the 1930s had meanwhile acquired a patina and given way to its replacement; but in the Berlin of 1945 any recourse to the period before 1933 meant opening a time capsule left untouched all those years. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the reconstruction of the city itself. For the architects and urban planners who in 1933 had had to shelve their plans for a modernized Berlin, the time had come.

“A MECHANICAL DECONGESTANT”

Destroyed, Berlin presented itself to the observer in two forms. One, as Isaac Deutscher noted, was vertical: the ruins projecting upward. But there was the horizontal, too: the open plain, the field, or, as was occasionally said after 1945, the steppe that had resulted from the destruction. “That steppe in the middle of Berlin” (Manuel Gasser)²⁰ was the center, approximately Potsdamer Platz, in which buildings and traffic had been at their most congested before the war and where now grass grew and wild rabbits lived. “On the sidewalks, nettles as tall as men, and where sleek lines of traffic used to move along, grass is secretly gathered at night for whatever livestock is hidden away at home,” wrote the poet Gottfried Benn, calling the city “a Mongolian border town provisionally still called Berlin.”

Urban planners saw it differently. They saw in the reversion of the metropolis into an open field not a relapse into barbarism but the successful creation of an open construction site they had long hoped for in vain. For representatives of modernity in the 1920s, the great obstacle

to the architectonic and structural modernization of Berlin was the existing city. In their eyes, clear and orderly plans had repeatedly been frustrated by the enormous, disorderly, unhealthy, and senseless urban heap. Thus the destruction of World War II could provoke a few dutiful tears for the ruined gems of architectural history, such as the Schloss and several Schinkel buildings. But beyond that, a feeling of liberation described more precisely the reaction of modern-minded architects and urban planners after 1945. Whether they had emigrated or remained in Germany, they were united on this point. "Berlin is no more! A decayed corpse!" noted Walter Gropius during his first visit in August 1947,²¹ and recommended that the American military government construct a new capital in Frankfurt am Main. Martin Wagner at Harvard, who was not to revisit his former sphere of influence until the 1950s, suggested that Berlin's mounds of rubble not be rebuilt but that an entirely new city by this name, if possible in another place, be erected: "The very idea seems monstrous, even barbaric . . . to rebuild on German rubble what made it rubble: obsolescence, outlived purpose, and an architecture of spent respect."²²

From the 1920s until his banishment in 1933, Martin Wagner had been the head of planning on Berlin's Board of Works, initiator of, among other things, the redesign of Alexanderplatz and a pioneer of modern housing developments. A disciple of the technological utopia, he made it his life goal to organize residential and urban construction as Henry Ford had the manufacture of automobiles. Houses were no longer to be built of stone, and if possible also no longer in a cubic form, but produced, like the Model T, a million times over from light, cheap, nondurable materials. The city Wagner envisioned was no longer a historically and culturally groomed structure, but a machine that would break down with age, and whose breakdown informed its very conception. The lifetime of the houses planned by Wagner was twenty-five years, the period of amortization for the capital required for their production. Architectonic and urban planning vision went hand in hand with technological and economic calculation. His concept of the housing development was meant to initiate "a city-country culture in which urban dwellers close to the country and a rural population close to the city might join hands in a common ascent toward a better way of life."²³

Wagner's ideal of a city close to the country, embedded in nature and abundantly verdant, was shared by the entire modern urban-planning movement. And in Wagner's Berlin of the 1920s, that ideal had been approximated more closely than anywhere else. Not in the center, to be

sure; on the periphery, though, arose developments considered exemplary in international regard—for example, Britz, Zehlendorf, Lindenhof, Eichkamp, and Frohnau. Thus in 1929 Bruno Taut could with a certain right speak of the “country character” that Berlin, in distinction to Paris, London, and New York, possessed and could not shake off, as innate a feature as the avenues in Paris or skyscrapers in New York.²⁴ That same year Wagner’s colleague in the Berlin Magistrat (city administration), commissioner of transportation Ernst Reuter, announced as the objective of his department: “With all our resources, we hope to encourage the fusion of metropolis and countryside, the development of the metropolis into a green city out in the open, a city between lakes and forests.”²⁵

For those colleagues of Gropius and Wagner who had stayed in Berlin, the city in 1945 was the unexpected realization of this vision. The destruction, which they euphemistically called a “mechanical decongestant” (Hans Scharoun), had transformed what had once been a city back into nature, or, in Alfred Döblin’s words, into “a scrap of earth through which the Spree flows.” Here, all former impediments now swept away, their ideal garden metropolis of the future could be erected. In addition to the de-densification of the center, modern planners found further cause for gratification. Those outer districts of Berlin, in whose construction they had taken part and which they regarded with pride and satisfaction as the first actualization of modern urban planning, had remained essentially undestroyed. Like a “wreath of outlying municipalities [around] the extinguished crater” (Theodor Plivier), these districts stood ranged about the annihilated center, signaling in the sheer fact of their survival that they were more suitable to the modernity of the twentieth century than had been the historic center.

It was logical that plans for Berlin’s reconstruction—or new construction—should proceed from the crater’s periphery. Of the three most important designs, two bore the names of outlying districts: the Zehlendorf plan and the Hermsdorf plan. The third, the so-called Collective Plan developed by the Magistrat’s planning group under the direction of Hans Scharoun, detailed most fully what the other two also attempted: the transformation of Greater Berlin into a diffuse and verdant garden city according to the principles of modern urban planning set down in the Athens Charter by the International Congress of Modern Architecture in 1933. “What the mechanical decongestant of bombings and the final battle have left behind,” said Scharoun in 1946, “gives us the chance to create an ‘urban countryside.’ . . . This will make it