

The Berlin Wall

A WORLD DIVIDED, 1961-1989

Frederick Taylor

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FOREWORD

THE BARBED-WIRE BEGINNINGS of the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961 divided, overnight and with savage finality, families, friends, and neighborhoods in what had until 1945 been the thriving, populous capital of Germany. Streets, subway lines, rail links, even apartment houses, sewers, and phone lines, were cut and blocked.

The Wall represented a uniquely squalid, violent—and, as we now know, ultimately futile—episode in the post-war world. The subsequent international crisis over Berlin, which was especially intense during the summer and autumn of '61, threatened the world with the risk of a military conflict—one that seemed as if it could escalate at any time to a terrifying nuclear confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union.

How did it come to this? In 1945, the victors of World War II—the USA, the Soviet Union, Britain, and by special dispensation the French—had divided Germany into four Zones of Occupation and its capital, Berlin, into four Sectors. Germany had been a problem ever since its unification in 1871, a big, restless country in the heart of Europe. The over mighty Germany of the Kaiser's and Hitler's time must, the wartime Allies agreed, never be allowed to re-emerge. With somewhere between thirty and fifty million dead in the bloodbath that Nazi Germany had inflicted on the world, it was hardly surprising that many in Europe and America went even further and demanded that it be kept disunited.

After the defeat of Nazi Germany, even as its surviving people strove desperately to feed and house themselves and to re-create some kind of viable economic existence, came the Cold War. From the late 1940s, Germany itself—what was left of it after the Poles and the Russians had carved chunks off its eastern territories—became a mutant creature of the new Communist-capitalist conflict. It divided into West Germany (the 'Federal Republic of Germany'), a parliamentary democracy of some fifty million anchored into the western NATO alliance, and the much smaller East Germany (the 'German Democratic Republic'), a more or less willing member of the Communist Warsaw Pact. By contrast with the increasingly prosperous West Germany, the GDR remained a struggling social experiment, a mere third as large. From the early 1950s, the 'Iron Curtain' ran through the middle of the former Reich, manifesting itself in a fortified border between the two Cold War German states.

Until 1961, however, Berlin represented a dangerous anomaly from the East's point of view. Though a hundred miles inside East Germany, and surrounded by Soviet and East German forces, it remained under joint four-power Allied occupation and kept a special status, still more or less one city, in which fairly free movement was possible. Its porous boundaries represented a hole, an 'escape hatch' through which enterprising East Germans could head to the by-now booming West in pursuit of political freedom and a higher standard of living than their neo-Stalinist masters were prepared to allow them.

Between 1945 and 1961, some two and a half million fled in this way, reducing the GDR's population by around 15 per cent. Ominously for the Communist regime, most emigrants were young and well qualified. The country was losing the cream of its educated professionals and skilled workers at a rate that risked making the Communist state totally unviable. During the summer of 1961, this exodus reached critical levels. Every day, thousands of East Germans slipped into West Berlin and from there were flown to West Germany itself along the so-called 'air corridors'. The regime was not prepared to abandon the political and economic restrictions that fuelled the haemorrhaging of its brightest and best. Hence, on that fateful August weekend, the Communists' vast undertaking to seal off East from West Berlin, to close the 'escape hatch'.

Since the end of the war, Berlin had been a constant, running sore in East-West relations. In 1948-9 Stalin had tried to blockade the Western-occupied sectors into submission by closing off all the land routes into the city. The West surprised him with a successful airlift that kept their sectors supplied with sufficient essentials to survive. After a little under a year of siege, the Russian leader gave up. However, only Stalin's death prevented a wall, or something very much like it, being constructed through Berlin in 1953. In 1958, his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, every bit as aware of the city's precarious position, started threatening West Berlin's status once more. The ebullient, unpredictable Soviet leader compared the Allied-occupied sectors to the West's tenderest parts. If, Khrushchev joked, he wanted to cause NATO pain, all he had to do was squeeze....

And on Sunday 13 August, Khrushchev squeezed. The day became known as 'Stacheldrahtsonntag' (Barbed-Wire Sunday). Within a few weeks this improvised wire obstacle started to morph into a formidable cement one, a heavily fortified, guarded, and booby-trapped barrier dividing the city and enclosing West Berlin.

The Wall shocked and amazed the world, a massive engineering and security project that before it was built many outsiders had dismissed as impossible. It extended for almost a hundred miles, with thirty or so of it dividing East from West Berlin, the rest sealing off the surrounding East German countryside. It was overseen by 300 watchtowers,

manned by guards with orders to shoot to kill. The 'no man's land' between East and West was littered with lethal obstacles, alarms, and self-activating searchlights, with an eleven-foot-high clamber-proofed slab fence representing the final, on its own near-insuperable obstacle. The structure would soon become notorious even in the farthest, darkest corners of the earth as the 'Berlin Wall'.

Most Germans, of course, felt the building of this wall as a devastating blow. It was not just a brutal act in itself but also final proof, if proof were needed, that the reunification of their country that many still hoped for must remain a distant, even an impossible, dream. There was genuine outrage in West Germany, and also in the East, though this was rapidly suppressed by the Communist secret police, the infamous Stasi, who carried out thousands of arrests.

For Berliners, the drastic power-political surgery of 13 August 1961 was, of course, an especially tragic and painful experience. It was also a devastatingly intimate one. Familiar streets, parks, even individual buildings, were turned into perilous human traps, in which the squirming, helpless captives were often the westerners' own friends and relatives. West Berliners were forced to stand by and watch—often literally—as their fellow citizens in the East, seeking to exercise a freedom of movement that most of us take for granted, risked their safety, their liberty, and in some cases their lives, to cross the Wall in search of economic and political rights that were not available to them on their own side.

Some of those imprisoned by the Wall managed to escape. Many died in the attempt. Many more were arrested, tried, and served long jail sentences, often under harsh conditions. I hope that those who live in more fortunate communities elsewhere in the world will summon up the imagination to conceive what it might have been like for Berliners to have such a barbarous fracture inflicted on their city, their neighborhoods, and their deeply rooted relationships. I have tried to tell their story in these pages, and to do justice to their courage and their determination when confronted with this deprivation.

Nonetheless, at a distance of years that is rapidly accelerating towards half a century since the Wall was created, it is a writer's duty to reflect that changing perspective. One must treasure emotion and pity, but also measure these feelings against the incomplete but nevertheless clear shape of a political map that has finally begun to emerge from the violent, tragic fog of the twentieth century. Which is to say that the Cold War has been over for many years now, and is truly receding into history. It is time to re-examine, not the fact of individual and communal suffering that the Cold War caused, especially in Berlin—for that fact is indisputable—but to cautiously trace the more precise parameters of that suffering, and the way it fitted into the greater global picture.

Looked at in this more distanced and nuanced way, the building of the Wall, although it unleashed a brief East-West showdown, takes on a more complex appearance. Most ordinary Western civilians who watched the shocking and dramatic scenes from Berlin on their television sets, for this was the first international crisis to be properly televised, shared the horror of Germans and Berliners. However, behind the scenes—seen from a global and power-political perspective by those not directly affected—for the West's political and military leaders, the building of the Wall was not necessarily the unalloyed catastrophe that it first appeared to the general public. Some would say it was almost as if a boil had been lanced.

So, was what happened that Sunday in August 1961 a problem that made the Cold War worse? Or was the Wall, in fact, not so much a problem as a solution?

There is little indication, it turns out, that any of the three major Western powers—the USA, under the recently elected President John F. Kennedy, or Macmillan's Britain or General de Gaulle's France—were decisively opposed to the division of Berlin. On the contrary, we now have considerable evidence that, since they could not reunify Germany in a way they could tolerate, the West's leaders went along with the construction of the Wall. It was unpleasant and cruel, but it removed a continuing, serious danger to stability in Europe.

In effect, our governments, though in public they threw up their hands in fastidious horror—the Wall supplied, above all, an excellent propaganda weapon against the Communists—actually quietly abandoned the GDR's seventeen million citizens to their fate.

That fate was for them to be held captive, for more than half a human lifetime, in a sealed country. The experience of East Germany's population was made a little more tolerable by some basic social and welfare provisions and by a somewhat higher standard of living than elsewhere in the Soviet-ruled bloc, but it remained in most respects ugly, shabby, and bereft of hope and can only be compared to a form of collective incarceration.

This book explores how, through blood and sand, and then barbed wire and cement, this bizarre, closed world came into being. It tells how the leaders of the world reacted to this, and how ordinary people suffered, fought against, and survived the trauma. It recounts how for decades this prison-state enjoyed a foetid flourishing behind its fortifications. Finally, it celebrates the way in which how—just as quickly as it had arisen between dusk and dawn on 12/13 August 1961—during one unpredicted and unpredictable, extraordinary night a little over 28 years later, on 9/10 November 1989, the Berlin Wall and the world it had spawned met a sudden, exhilarating end.

SAND

1

MARSH TOWN

IN THE SUMMER OF 1961, sixteen years after the end of the Second World War, the world was faced for the first time with the realistic threat of nuclear annihilation.

The background cause was the development, during the 1950s, of massively destructive nuclear weapons by both East and West. The immediate reason was the construction of a wall, a wall dividing a city built on sand.

Berlin, where this ominous thing happened, had always been an improbable metropolis. A fishing and trading settlement, surviving on sandy, boggy soil, it then became capital of one of the poorest monarchies in Europe: Prussia, a state whose very weakness gradually became its strength, and whose habitual trade of military violence—forced on it by its meagreness of natural resources—made it powerful, and Berlin one of the great urban centres of the world.

So how and when did the city's rise begin?

Twentieth-century Berlin was divided. And at its very beginning it also consisted of two cities—or rather, large villages. One was called Berlin and the other Cölln, located on opposite sandy banks at a narrow point in the northward flow of the river Spree. Cölln on the western bank owed its name to the ancient western German Christian city founded by the Romans, Cologne (Köln in German); on the eastern side, the settlement of Berlin was probably not named after the noble bear—as sentimental natives still insist—but more prosaically after the old West Slavic word for marsh, *brl*. Marsh town.

Two heritages found expression in those two names. One was brought with them by the Germanic colonists from the West who flocked into the Slav lands between the Elbe and the Oder as these were conquered. The

other expressed the lasting spirit of the non-German people who lived here until this time. These people were gradually Germanised but remained, in some mysterious way that would frustrate later theorists of racial purity, not pure 'Aryan' in the Nazi sense. This was the Berlin 'mix', reinforced by mass immigrations from the eastern and southern regions of Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the capital of the united Germany became one of the great boom towns of the continent.

At the beginning the expansion of the twin settlement was gradual. There was no fertile hinterland, but Berlin-Cölln's location was sufficiently convenient that it grew steadily on the basis of the Baltic river-borne trade with landlocked central Europe. Local rye and oak timber were shipped north along the veins of the waterways that covered the North German Plain, and in exchange herring and dried cod came from Hamburg. Later, Thuringia supplied iron, Flanders fine cloth, and even oils and Mediterranean exotica such as figs and ginger found their way there. Walls were built. Soon a mill-dam straddled the Spree. In 1307, the towns merged.

Berlin-Cölln owed allegiance to a local magnate. Its overlord was the Margrave of Brandenburg, to whom annual taxes were paid. Though represented by a governor, the margrave left the town mostly to its own devices.

City magistrates and guilds, dominated by patrician families, regulated everyday economic and social life. Punishments were harsh. Crimes that warranted death or lethal torture included not just murder or treason but also poisoning, practising black magic or witchcraft, arson and adultery. Between 1391 and 1448, in a town with a consistent population of around 8,000 souls, 46 alleged miscreants were hanged, 20 burned at the stake, 22 beheaded, 11 broken on the wheel, 17 buried alive (a specially favoured fate for women), and 13 tortured to death.¹ Countless mutilations, including severing of hands, slicing of ears, and ripping out of tongues, were administered for lesser transgressions.

Nevertheless, town life even under such harsh conditions offered a certain security, and relative freedom. *Stadt Luft macht frei*, as the ancient German saying went—'City air makes a man free'.

Of course, wars, plagues and fires tormented its inhabitants, just as

they did other Europeans in the unlucky fourteenth century. The Ascanian dynasty that ruled Brandenburg for centuries eventually died out. Disease, war and famine stalked the land. The Holy Roman Emperor decided to name a new ruler for this neglected area, a scion of a Nuremberg family that had flourished as hereditary castellans of that powerful imperial free city. The family was called Hohenzollern. Its members would rule here through triumph and disaster for 500 years.

Frederick VI Hohenzollern officially became Frederick I of Brandenburg in 1415. Berlin's citizens were delighted. The patrician élite was pleased that this busy man from a distant province left them to rule as they had done for centuries. Berlin kept its privileges, and so did they.

In 1440, the first Hohenzollern ruler died. His successor, Frederick II, unpromisingly known as 'Irontooth', proved the city's nemesis. He played the citizens off against the patricians, then crushed the rebellion that followed. Henceforth the city was ruled by his nominees. The Margrave would deal with Berliners' property and levy taxes on them as he wished.

In 1486, the city became the lords of Brandenburg's official residence. From now until the second decade of the twentieth century, the monarch ruled there, in person and almost entirely absolutely.

In the 1530s, Brandenburg's ruler, Joachim II—now bearing the title of 'Elector', as one of the princes who chose the Holy Roman Emperor—adopted Protestantism. In February 1539, he attended the first Lutheran service to be held in Berlin. His subjects followed him—on the whole, willingly—into this new religious direction.

The states of the Holy Roman Empire agreed on a policy of mutual toleration. According to the neat Latin slogan, *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose region it is, his religion), it would be up to each German prince to determine whether Lutheranism or Catholicism would be the official religion in his particular area. The religious truce and Germany's prosperity lasted until the early 1600s.

At that time, the ageing Holy Roman Emperor Matthias appointed as his heir a nephew, Grand Duke Ferdinand. Ferdinand, a Catholic diehard, became king of Hungary and, in 1618, of Bohemia. He began persecuting Protestants within his lands, an ominous indication of what

would happen when he gained supreme power in the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation'.

As it happened, 1618 was also a landmark year for the Hohenzollerns of Brandenburg. The Duke of Prussia, descendant of Teutonic knights and a vassal of the Polish king, ruled over extensive territory bordering the Baltic Sea. Having only daughters, he bequeathed the dukedom to his son-in-law, the Elector of Brandenburg, who inherited it after the Duke's death that year. Henceforth the word 'Prussian' was one with which the family would be forever connected. This would transform a Slavic tribal designation (the *Prus*, original inhabitants of the land, had been Slavs) into an idea, a way of life, a world-view. For good or for ill.

Meanwhile, the religious and dynastic powder-keg of early seventeenth-century Europe was about to explode.

Bohemia was divided between Protestants and Catholics. Ferdinand's moves against the Protestants provoked an uprising by local nobles. The rebels proclaimed Ferdinand deposed and elected a Protestant prince as king. He and his wife, daughter of James I of England, were crowned in Prague.

In 1620, at the Battle of the White Mountain, imperial forces defeated the Bohemian Protestants, wiping out the flower of the native aristocracy. Emperor Ferdinand decided to continue the war into Germany and forcibly regain the Protestant northern states for the Holy Mother Church.

The hellish maelstrom that ensued was known as the Thirty Years War. It was the most terrible conflict since the Dark Ages, in proportion to the population of Europe at that time, killing more than the Second World War. Bloody battles and sieges scarred the landscape. A rapacious, often half-starved mercenary soldiery roamed Germany for year after year, raping and looting and killing, destroying crops and laying waste to towns that had once been the pride of Europe. Bubonic plague and typhus cut a lethal swathe through a population weakened by malnutrition. In 1648, the exhausted powers arrived at a peace settlement, but Germany and Central Europe were changed for ever.

Berlin escaped lightly at first, but after the city was sacked in 1627 by imperial troops, a long night of horror descended. A few years later, the Swedish King, Gustavus Adolphus 'rescued' the city, but his soldiers'

depredations proved every bit as appalling as those of the emperor's desperadoes.

Berlin's civilians were routinely tortured by roasting, boiling, and mutilation, to force them to confess the whereabouts of 'treasure' or food hoards. One method favoured by Gustavus Adolphus's men was to pour raw sewage down the throats of victims; for many years afterwards this type of waste was known as the 'Swedish drink'. In 1631-2, starvation in Berlin grew so widespread that knackers' yards were raided for food. Even the city's gallows were plundered. One report described fresh human bones found in a pit with their marrow sucked dry.

The foraging demands of huge, wandering armies, and the combatants' determination to drain their conquests of every last gold piece and ear of corn, left Brandenburg, like the rest of Germany, impoverished, brutalised and stalked by famine. At the end of the war, only 845 dwellings still stood in the whole of Berlin. Cölln, on the western bank of the Spree, had been put to the torch in 1641 and all but destroyed. The population of Brandenburg had been reduced to 600,000.

Only with peace did Berlin's and Brandenburg-Prussia's luck begin to turn. Succeeding in 1640, Elector Frederick William I, turned out to be the first of a series of energetic and talented rulers who would turn their barren, devastated homeland into a European power of some consequence.

There had been no real winner in the Thirty Years War, no one strong enough to impose his own version of 'victor's morality'. The Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the war, declared that there should be no question of blame or war-guilt, or punishment for atrocities. The Latin phrase used was *Perpetua oblivio et amnestia* (eternal forgetting and amnesty—simply put, 'forgive and forget'). Europe had paid a terrible price for intolerance.

At the peace, young Frederick William I acquired more territory: Eastern Pomerania, filling in the gap between Prussia and Brandenburg; the former bishoprics of Magdeburg and Halberstadt; and some lands in the west of Germany.

He took away what traditional rights and liberties the populace still enjoyed, and his war-weary subjects did not resist. Brandenburg-Prussia embraced the form of efficient, measured and (for most people) benevolent despotism that became its hallmark.

The 'Great Elector', as Frederick William became known, also founded an institution that would have enormous significance: the Prussian army. When he succeeded to the throne, his army had been a small, rather ineffectual mercenary operation. He determined to build a permanent, professional fighting force that would gain Brandenburg, known contemptuously elsewhere in Germany as 'the sandbox', some respect among his peers. By 1648, the Elector commanded a professional army of 8,000 men, enough to turn him into a useful ally and to ensure a share in the spoils of peace.

Though authoritarian, the new, post-1648 Electorate emphasised religious tolerance. There were practical reasons for this. The Thirty Years War had caused a catastrophic reduction in the population. Ruined and deserted farm and manor houses dotted a neglected landscape. Brandenburg-Prussia desperately needed people, whatever their original nationality or personal creed.

Towards the end of Frederick William's reign, the Catholic French King Louis XIV began, in a fit of piety, to persecute his country's sizeable Protestant minority. In 1685, Louis officially banned Protestantism and began the destruction of its churches. The French Protestants, known as Huguenots, were skilled craftsmen and tradesmen, diligent and hardworking—exactly what Brandenburg-Prussia needed. Frederick William issued the Edict of Potsdam, in which he openly invited Huguenot refugees to come to Brandenburg.

More than 20,000 Huguenots settled in Brandenburg. By 1687, when the Elector died, they amounted to 20 per cent of Berlin's population. Berlin became an immigrant city, and would remain so until the twenty-first century.

Frederick William's successor reacted against his father's budgetary stringency. Government became lax. There was an air of indulgence around Berlin that would not be seen again until the 1920s. The new Elector's only political achievement came in 1701, when the Holy Roman Emperor awarded a royal crown for Prussia. Henceforth, he became also 'King in Prussia' (the word 'of' came into use only later in the century).

The palace's free-spending ways put a lot of money into circulation in Berlin. The city's population increased from 4,000 at the end of the

Thirty Years War to 55,000 in 1713, when the merry monarch died. Unfortunately, Prussia went bankrupt in the process.

Ascending the throne as King Frederick William I, the new ruler was coarse and narrow-minded. Not in the slightest interested in the arts, science (except the military kind) or the usual royal pleasures, he nevertheless transformed his state in many ways for the good, reforming education and the state machinery and making the army even more formidable.

An impressive, even remarkable monarch. But the strangest thing was that, although he put up to 80 per cent of the budget into his army, and would go down in history as 'the soldier king', Frederick William was in practice a man of peace. Brandenburg Prussia's population increased to over two million, and massive strides were made in economic development.

The King's personal behavior, however, was obsessive, neurotic, even sadistic. His officials scoured Europe for men over six feet tall, who were inducted into his army. When ill or depressed he would have these 'tall fellows' (*lange Kerle*) paraded for his delectation, even marching them through his bedchamber. Seeing the army as a model for society, and yearning for that society to be perfectly ordered, he inflicted brutal discipline.

In 1730, Frederick William also built the most comprehensive wall Berlin had so far seen. Its aim was not just to defend Berlin against enemies, but to act as an 'excise wall', enabling the King to tax travellers, commercial shipments, or any consumer goods being moved in and out of the city. The wall was also intended to prevent frequent desertions from the king's army. A sentry was posted every hundred metres, and if any unhappy soldier was seen escaping, a cannon shot would alert the nearby villagers. Captured deserters faced a brutal running of the gauntlet, while a second attempt meant death.² A similar wall was built at nearby Potsdam, to keep the garrison there in as well.

Frederick William sired ten children. In a continuation of the turn-and-turn-again tradition in the Hohenzollern family, his eldest son, Frederick, was a complete contrast to his father: a slightly-built, sensitive boy, interested in the arts and philosophy. Keen to toughen up his heir and ensure his fitness for the throne, Frederick William had him woken

each morning by the firing of a cannon. At six years old, young 'Fritz' was given his own unit of child cadets to drill, and soon granted his own arsenal of real weaponry. The boy was beaten for letting himself be thrown by a bolting horse; and again for showing weakness by putting on gloves in cold weather.

At eighteen, the Crown Prince tried to flee the kingdom with an older aristocratic friend, Hans Hermann von Katte. They were caught. Fritz was kept under arrest at a fortress, and forced to watch from a window as his friend was beheaded on the parade ground below. Within a couple of years, the Crown Prince was married off to a pleasant, pious princess, Elisabeth Christine of Brunswick. The marriage proved childless. After his succession, they lived apart. Fritz kept no mistresses. His possible homosexuality has been the subject of keen historical gossip ever since.

When the 'soldier king' died, many of his subjects heaved a sigh of relief. However, in one of the great paradoxes of European history, where the 'soldier king' had brought peace, his son, the 'philosopher king', would inflict war and suffering.

Frederick had succeeded in May 1740. In October, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles VI, died, leaving no male heir. Since the imperial throne, though technically subject to election, had, in fact, become the family property of the Austrian Habsburgs, a power vacuum threatened. Charles had changed the law so that he might be succeeded by his daughter, Maria Theresa. Most of royal Europe had accepted this. Prussia was one of the states that had not.

In an act of unscrupulous opportunism, the 'philosopher king' marched the powerful army his loathed father had created into the neighbouring Habsburg province of Silesia. This rich district, once part of Poland, would, if Frederick could hold on to it, immeasurably increase the wealth of Prussia-Brandenburg, supplying it with the agricultural, industrial and mineral resources that the state urgently needed. He justified this occupation in terms of an obscure sixteenth-century treaty that his lawyers dug out of the diplomatic cupboard.

Thanks to his excellent army, the young Prussian king won the so-called 'War of the Austrian Succession', and held onto Silesia's riches, but this was not the end of the story. The highly intelligent and astute Maria Theresa made the peace she had to make, but withdrew to plan her

revenge. She began weaving a new web of alliances, combining the power of Austria, France and Russia against the upstart Prussia.

In the decade of peace that followed, Frederick ran a highbrow salon at the glass-and-stone pleasure palace, *Sans Souci* ('Without Care'), which he built just outside Berlin at the royal seat of Potsdam. He introduced many reforms, some of them genuinely humane. He abolished the torture of civilians and the death sentence except for murder. He extended religious tolerance, allowing the Catholics to build a cathedral in Berlin. Like his father, he was also an obsessive micro-manager. It was due to Frederick's efforts that the potato became Prussia's staple food.

In 1756, with war once more threatening, Frederick undertook a characteristically sly war of pre-emption, invading the rich but militarily weak state of Saxony. This he occupied for several years, exploiting its wealth and manpower to underpin his war-making. 'Saxony,' he quipped cynically, 'is like a sack of flour. Every time you beat it, something comes out.' Almost a hundred thousand out of two million Saxons (5 per cent of the population) died as a result of the Prussian invasion and occupation, including roughly the same proportion of the inhabitants of Dresden, Saxony's beautiful capital. A third of its built-up area was destroyed by Prussian cannon fire and petrol bombs in 1760. Despite having killed more Germans and destroyed more of Germany than any commander until the RAF's Sir Arthur Harris 200 years later, Frederick the Great remains a national hero.

None the less, by 1760 he had suffered several crushing defeats. Berlin was occupied by the Russians and the Austrians. Surrender seemed inevitable. Then the Empress of Russia, Elisabeth, died. The son who succeeded her, Tsar Peter III, was a fanatical fan of Prussian militarism. This unexpected *deus ex machina* restored Frederick's fortunes. The young man granted peace on highly favourable terms, ending the 'Seven Years War'.

Moreover, Prussia's main ally, Britain, had driven the French out of North America (where this conflict is known as the 'French and Indian War') and had also established itself as the dominant power in India. Britain became the first world superpower. The country's heroic friend, King Frederick, was wildly popular in Britain. Until Prussia's name was blackened by the First World War, there were inns in England named

after him, and well into the nineteenth century the Anglo-Prussian alliance was taken for granted in both countries.

The final *coup* of Frederick's reign was the dismantling of the almost thousand-year-old kingdom of Poland. Paralysed by internal dissent, this once-mighty Eastern European power made tempting prey for its neighbours. In 1772 Frederick agreed with Austria and Russia to carve great slices off Poland. Within a little over two decades, Poland was wiped from the map and would not re-emerge as a properly independent country until 1918. Prussia, however, gained a solid, continuous block of territory and a much increased population.

In 1786, Frederick died at Sans Souci, alone except for his dogs and by all accounts world-weary and reclusive in old age. Berlin had recovered from the disastrous wars with remarkable speed. Its population stood at 150,000. Thirty thousand worked in industry and trade, while 3,500 were civil servants. The Berlin garrison numbered 25,000 men, and 20 per cent of Berliners were connected with the military.³ The future of Frederick's system of government seemed assured for decades, even centuries to come.

Three years later, the French Revolution broke out and changed everything. The first eruption of popular democratic rebellion on the continent, it spread like a virus and threatened to destroy the whole system of hereditary privilege upon which Frederick, like all European monarchs, based his thinking. When that revolution turned sour, a new despot rose to power in the shape of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

The greatest general and most successful conqueror the post-medieval world had seen, during two decades of dominance the Corsican upstart created a new Europe that remains recognisably his 200 years later.

Napoleon was old Prussia's nemesis. And, in the short term at least, Berlin's.

On 27 October 1806, Napoleon entered Berlin. Two weeks before, the Emperor had inflicted a massive double-blow on the Prussian forces. The French had prevailed first at Jena, near Weimar, south-west of Berlin, and then again at Auerstedt, a few hours' ride to the north. The victory, achieved against a Prussian army exceeding a hundred thousand men,

was total. At Auerstedt, King Frederick III's forces outnumbered the enemy two to one, and still they turned tail and ran from the superbly disciplined French.

Napoleon marched his victorious army down the wide boulevard of Unter den Linden into the heart of the city, and paraded through the magnificent Brandenburg Gate.

The gate was a new, grander opening in the defence and customs wall, now totalling seventeen kilometres in length, and 4.2 metres high, that still surrounded central Berlin. It had been designed by the famous architect Carl Gotthard Langhans, and completed just a few years earlier. Atop its neo-classical columns the sculptor Johann Gottfried Schadow had created a huge stone quadriga or four-horsed chariot, the symbol of victory in the old Olympic Games. In this case the goddess Victory, who drove the chariot, carried the olive wreath of peace, which was a pleasant and perhaps over-optimistic touch.

Initially, those Berliners who wished for more freedom, especially the unenfranchised middle classes, had hopes of Napoleon. The Emperor promised reform of the laws, even a constitution. Elections were held for a Berlin city council.

The French dictator's real aims were, however, soon clear. He planned to use Berlin and Prussia as a money-pump and supplier of manpower, to turn it into another puppet regime in French-ruled Europe. Already impoverished and stripped of huge areas of territory, with her army reduced to just over 40,000 men (of which 16,000 were to be at Napoleon's disposal for new military adventures), Prussia was also forced to pay hundreds of millions of francs in reparation and occupation costs. The French set about stripping the Prussian capital of its treasures, including the quadriga from the Brandenburg Gate, which was carted off to Paris. And that was just the official looting. With 25,000 often rowdy French occupation troops quartered on its citizenry, Berlin stood at its lowest ebb for a hundred and fifty years.

Napoleon himself seemed amazed at how swiftly Prussia had been vanquished. Just before entering Berlin, he paid a visit to the grave of Frederick the Great, in the crypt of the Garrison Church at Potsdam. There he told his officers: 'Hats off, gentlemen! If he were still alive, we would not be here!'⁴

The people of Prussia were forced to take a hard look at the system under which they had been living. So was the state's ruling élite.

Some of the ensuing reforms were aimed at making Prussia better run. Others had to do with re-establishing its military power. The latter were necessarily covert, including General Scharnhorst's most cunning creation, the *Landwehr* (Home Guard), which by training a revolving, parttime citizen army circumvented the limitations placed on its size by Napoleon. Its official strength may never have exceeded these restrictions, but somehow by 1813 an army of 280,000 stood at the King's behest.

A passionate spirit of rebellion seethed beneath the relatively calm surface of occupied Berlin. The anti-French forces within Prussia, and in Germany as a whole, were merely awaiting their opportunity.

In June 1812, after massing an army of a million men from all over Europe, including Prussia, Napoleon invaded Russia. The Emperor won every major battle, but the campaign's outcome was catastrophic. In the fierce winter of 1812/13 Napoleon's *Grande Armée* left Moscow in flames and retreated through snow and ice towards the safety of Europe, harried by Cossacks, plagued by cold, hunger and disease. Only 18,000 troops crossed the river Niemen back into Poland.

The Prussian king, Frederick III, who had meekly supplied Napoleon with 20,000 soldiers for his disastrous march on Moscow, finally changed sides. The entire Prussian army was turned against Napoleon, and men who had been secretly training flocked to the colours. For them the architect Schinkel designed a special medal for bravery, to be awarded to any hero, irrespective of rank. It was called the Iron Cross.

Prussia, Germany, and the rest of Europe rose up against French domination in a wave of idealistic, romantic nationalism known as the 'War of Liberation'. Napoleon was defeated and exiled. Many in Berlin and elsewhere hoped that a new, better Germany would arise.

A brave new world for Berlin, Prussia and Germany? Not at all. The following years saw a concerted effort to put the stopper back in the reformist bottle. The victorious absolutist monarchs thought they could turn the clock back to the eighteenth century. For forty years they almost succeeded. All talk of national liberation and civic freedom was suppressed, in Prussia as elsewhere.

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