

Photography

BERLIN: PORTRAIT OF A CITY

HANS CHRISTIAN ADAM

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This is a blockbuster of a book. Too tall to fit on a standard bookshelf, too heavy to take anywhere, too slick and glossy to become a reference work: published by a great purveyor of the genre, it seems manifestly destined for the coffee table. That said, *Berlin: Portrait of a City* is more than the sum of its parts. It is a remarkably rich and often poignant collection of photographs and other visual and textual material. Expertly and intelligently assembled, it will have wide appeal. It has as much to offer casual browsers – including just about

anyone who has ever been to Berlin – as it has to sustain the curiosity of scholars concerned with German history and material culture, photography or wider urban modernity.

The book brings together images of the city and its inhabitants by 280 photographers. They cover the last 150 years of Berlin's turbulent history, from formal views of Berlin's Museum Island in the 1850s, right up to the cheeky final image: the so-called 'fan mile' at the Brandenburg gate with a big-screen projection of a stiff Chancellor Angela Merkel standing in contrast to an ecstatic sea of fans and German flags at the kick-off of the 2006 football World Cup semi-final between Germany and Italy. It is an appropriate image to end a book that often suggestively implies the shifting

interrelationship between politics and mass culture, national identities and everyday life.

There are maps of Berlin, old and new. Five chronological sections trace the city's history from the Imperial era to the inter-war years, the Second World War and its aftermath, division into East and West and the rebuilding of Berlin from 1990 to the present. Short historical essays and well-chosen quotations and text extracts are also included, but the book's emphasis is primarily on the visual.

The photographs have clearly been chosen and arranged with a view to offering a kaleidoscopic portrait of Berlin. Something of the book's juxtaposition of snapshot fragments, ephemeral and marginal culture together with images of

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power, domination and momentous portent, evokes faint echoes of the methods of the classic commentators on modernity in Berlin – Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, Joseph Roth and others. There is throughout a fascinating interweaving of human incident and everyday life in the city, together with a powerful sense of the extraordinary, often violent changes that have shaped Berlin's topography and re-defined its identity over time.

There are Berliners at work – selling newspapers, filling schnapps bottles, pasting up advertising posters, lugging strange objects through the streets, operating machinery, sweeping up an infestation of caterpillars in the Tiergarten. There are Berliners at play – drinking, dancing, sunbathing, swimming, shopping, flirting, getting their kicks and relaxing. Yet there are also images of wreckage, chaos, conflict, brutality, domination and suffering. Some of the most poignant images in the book are where these different registers overlap – soldiers in 1918 babysitting a couple of toddlers in a pram; excited schoolgirls waving swastika flags in 1938; children in a West Berlin wasteland playing 'wall' in 1965, gesturing at one another across a pile of bricks. Or see a

1995 photograph of a group of high-spirited Santa Clauses posing on the Marx-Engels monument in the former East Berlin, at its base the graffiti inscription *Wir sind unschuldig* (We are innocent).

In contrast to some other publications of this species, in which the contents of the odd photographic archive are hastily flung together to make a book on some spurious premise, the picture editing here is judicious, astute, subtle and often wryly humorous. A 1907 photograph showing the miserable, cramped conditions in which a working-class couple and their ten children lived is slyly paired with the image on the page opposite showing the Kaiser in full plumage with his six sons and numerous generals on a New Year parade to the Neue Wache in 1914. There are recurring tropes allowing for such revealing comparisons at various points through the book. Take the display of various underclothes for sale. Near the start of the book we find ladies' lace gowns and a window full of pristine undershirts from 1910. Later, there are forlorn images of consumer choice in the GDR shop windows with anaemic tights and sturdy nonsense bras nestling absurdly between pot plants and Christmas decorations.

Rainer Viertböck: The Federal Chancellery. The new chancellery was designed by architects Axel Schultes and Charlotte Frank and completed in 2001. From *Berlin: Portrait of a City* by Hans Christian Adam.

The quality of the images throughout is excellent. There is a welcome lack of the kind of generic imagery aimed at the souvenir market and it is certainly on visual terms that the book succeeds. The book's minor weaknesses and limitations are in the text elements. While there are advantages to the juxtaposition of quotations in the German original and in English and French, some will be irritated by the tri-lingual essay text, which adds to the bulk of a book that is already pretty unwieldy. These texts, introducing each historical segment, are printed in small black type on high-sheen, deep silver-blue paper. This looks chic, but makes reading in almost any light so difficult that it is off-putting. Nonetheless – and admirably for a book of this kind – efforts have been made to enhance reference aspects in the form of short biographies of the photographers, a basic bibliography, index and a list of the sources of quotations.

Berlin: Portrait of a City is a book that can be enjoyed simply as an intriguing

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Roger Schall: The Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church reflected in a shop window (1936). Collection Madame Roger Schall, Paris. From *Berlin: Portrait of a City* by Hans Christian Adam.

what must be Europe's most fascinating and distinctive city.

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collection of historical photographs and pithy *bon mots* on the eventful life of a city. Through more careful inspection of the montage of images, however, the unique, fractured history of the city insinuates itself in a way that is thought provoking, memorable and sometimes disturbing. Whatever the case, it keeps alive the desire to keep returning – intellectually or physically – to