

National Capital: Berlin

Berlin

Of all the centers of German history over the last thousand years, Berlin has been the only one to bear the official title of “capital of the German Empire”. And yet, Berlin is something of a new arrival.

Berlin’s history is first documented around 1237 A.D. The site was originally a Slavic settlement on the Spree river attaining a certain significance in the Middle Ages as a trading post for goods from the east. The Hohenzollern dynasty, who ruled the surrounding region Brandenburg as prince electors since 1415, chose Berlin as capital of Brandenburg in 1470. Berlin acquired its character as princely residence under Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, the “*great prince elector*”.

In the 17th century, when the *Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation* suffered immensely under the 30-years religious war, Berlin lost half of its population. Friedrich Wilhelm therefore decided to give political asylum in the state of Brandenburg to the Huguenots - French Protestants, who had been severely persecuted in France. The French colony in Berlin enjoyed special privileges and many traces of them can still be found throughout the city as well as in the dialect spoken in Berlin which contains relics of French vocabulary.

In 1709, Berlin became the site of the court of the enlarged Brandenburg-Prussia when Hohenzollern inherited the eastern territory Prussia. Simultaneously the then crowned King Friedrich I of Prussia united the twin cities of Berlin and Cölln together with the suburbs. It was under his successor Friedrich II “the Great”, who climbed the royal throne in 1740, that Berlin became more important as the capital of the new state “Prussia” and Prussia rose now to significant military power in Europe after severe battles. Under the regency of Friedrich II impressive looking opera houses, theaters, libraries and churches were built in Berlin, the cultural life rose to European reputation.

During the second half of the 19th century Berlin became a metropolis. It developed to the largest industrial city on the European continent due to its favorable position between the Elbe and the Oder rivers, to rail links, and to the policies of the kings of

Prussia. The city also had the leading stock exchange. In addition to its political and constitutional roles, Berlin won a high prestige according to successes of its theaters which led the pace in the performing arts throughout the country. Fashions in Berlin were trend setting and the city also led in science, research and scholarship.

When the monarchy was abolished in 1918 and a republic based on a democratic constitution was declared, Berlin remained Germany’s capital. Berliners were cosmopolitan and quick to accept new ideas. The Golden Twenties blossomed in Berlin especially in the cultural area of theater performances, movies, operas and cabaret. The first period of democracy in Germany failed due to the economic consequences of World War I like mass unemployment and inflation.

The Nazis never succeeded in gaining a majority in free elections in the city. Leading Nazis never trusted the city of Berlin, and many of them, including Hitler himself, spent as much time as possible elsewhere. Still, between 1933 and 1945, Berlin represented the core from which war, terror and genocide were spread across the world. The city was heavily damaged by air raids and street combat when it was conquered by Soviet forces in 1945. The Four Powers agreed to put the city under their joint administration, but this lasted a mere three years. The divided city was the symbol of the Cold War especially after the construction of the Berlin Wall, and West Berlin a symbol of the unflinching will of its inhabitants to defend their freedom.

Berlin has retained its official title of capital since unification in 1990. After 40 years of division, Berlin is today once more a flourishing European metropolis with a population of 3.4 million citizens. A lot of sites in the city, which were not rebuilt after the bombing of World War II are now homes to new modern and impressive buildings built by a number of world famous architects like Sir Norman Foster, Frank Gehry, and Daniel Libeskind.