



# Berlin: Portrait of a City Through the Centuries

*Rory MacLean*

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Why are we drawn to certain cities? Perhaps because of a story read in childhood. Or a chance teenage meeting. Or maybe simply because the place touches us, embodying in its tribes, towers and history an aspect of our understanding of what it means to be human. Paris is about romantic love. Lourdes equates with devotion. New York means energy. London is forever trendy. Berlin is all about volatility.

Berlin is a city of fragments and ghosts, a laboratory of ideas, the fount of both the brightest and darkest designs of history's most bloody century. The once arrogant capital of Europe was devastated by Allied bombs, divided by the Wall, then reunited and reborn as one of the creative centers of the world. Today it resonates with the echo of lives lived, dreams realized, and evils executed with shocking intensity. No other city has repeatedly been so powerful and fallen so low; few other cities have been so shaped and defined by individual imaginations.

*Berlin* tells the volatile history of Europe's capital over five centuries through a series of intimate portraits of two dozen key residents: the medieval balladeer whose suffering explains the Nazis' rise to power; the demonic and charismatic dictators who schemed to dominate Europe; the genius Jewish chemist who invented poison gas for First World War battlefields and then the death camps; the iconic mythmakers like Christopher Isherwood, Leni Riefenstahl, and David Bowie, whose heated visions are now as real as the city's bricks and mortar. Alongside them are portrayed some of the countless ordinary Berliners who one has never heard of, whose lives can only be imagined: the Scottish mercenary who fought in the Thirty Years' War, the ambitious prostitute who refashioned herself as a baroness, the fearful Communist Party functionary who helped to build the Wall, and the American spy from the Midwest whose patriotism may have turned the course of the Cold War.

*Berlin* is a history book like no other, with an originality that reflects the nature of the city itself. In its architecture, through its literature, in its movies and songs, Berliners have conjured their hard capital into a place of fantastic human fantasy. No other city has so often surrendered itself to its own seductive myths. No other city has been so shaped and defined by individual imaginations. *Berlin* captures, portrays, and propagates the remarkable story of those myths and their makers.

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