
The Brandenburg Gate turns 225

It was inaugurated 225 years ago, on August 6, 1791. Since then, the Brandenburg Gate has seen the best and the worst of European history unfold - and still stands as a symbol of peace.



Monumental symbol of unity

There used to be 18 city gates to enter the Customs Wall of Berlin in the 19th century. As the only remaining one, the Brandenburg Gate withstood the city's tumultuous history to become an unmistakable landmark of the German capital. The 26-meter (85-foot) high sandstone structure might not be as imposing as other comparable monuments, but it's definitely a symbolic heavyweight.



Athens on the River Spree

This picture shows the former city gate in 1764. Commissioned by Friedrich Wilhelm II, the Brandenburg Gate was inaugurated on August 6, 1791. The architect Carl Gotthard Langhans was inspired by the gateway to the Acropolis in Athens for this neoclassical monument. Berlin had established its reputation as a cultural hub in the 18th century; a poet dubbed the city "Athens on the River Spree."



The Peace Gate

A quadriga conceived by the sculptor Johann Gottfried Schadow was added to the ensemble in 1793. This sculpture of a chariot drawn by four horses was driven by Eirene, the Greek goddess of peace. While the values of the French Revolution were finding their way to Prussia, the gate on the road to Brandenburg was named Friedenstor - the Peace Gate.



War trophy

Despite these noble ideals, the Peace Gate would quickly be afflicted by war. In 1806, Napoleon's victorious soldiers marched through it and seized the entire Quadriga, bringing it back to Paris as a war trophy. Although the plan was to exhibit the looted sculpture, it stayed packed in boxes in the French capital.



The triumphal return

After Napoleon's defeat, the Quadriga returned to Berlin in 1814 thanks to General Ernst von Pfüel. From then on, his family was allowed to use the central archway of the gate, otherwise reserved to royalty - normal citizens were restricted to the outer lanes. The statue was redesigned by Karl Friedrich Schinkel to represent Victoria, the goddess of victory, holding a cross and a Prussian eagle.



Nazi propaganda

On January 1933, the Nazis celebrated Hitler's seizure of power with a torchlight procession through the Brandenburg Gate. The gate was to be included in the creation a great East-West city axis in the planned "Welthauptstadt Germania," the ambitious vision of architectural renewal of the capital of Germany after the planned victory of World War II.



After World War II

The Brandenburg Gate was badly damaged during World War II, but remained standing. As it was located in the sector occupied and administered by the Soviet Union, the Soviet flag was flown atop the gate from 1945 until 1957, when it was replaced by an East German flag. Little was left of the Quadriga - the horse's head that survived is now kept at the Märkisches Museum.



Restoration in 1957

Luckily, a plaster cast of the Quadriga had been prepared in 1942, allowing the sculpture to be recreated. Despite arguments, the authorities of East and West Berlin managed to agree that the gate should be restored. The Quadriga was returned to the top of the gate in 1957. However, the East Berlin government had the iron cross and the Prussian eagle removed from the sculpture shortly afterwards.



No man's land

When the Berlin Wall was built on August 13, 1961, access to the Brandenburg Gate from West Berlin was blocked, as the wall formed an arc just outside the western side. A smaller wall was also built on the eastern side, making the gate off limits to East Berliners too. The sign on this picture of the western side warns: "Caution! You are now leaving West Berlin."



'Tear down this wall!'

The Brandenburg Gate served as the backdrop for Ronald Reagan's famous speech on June 12, 1987, where he called, "Mr. Gorbachov, tear down this wall!" Loudspeakers made those words audible on the east side as well. West German President Richard von Weizsäcker also used the gate as a metaphor by declaring: "The German question is open as long as the Brandenburg Gate is closed."



Symbol of reunification

When the Berlin Wall came down on November 9, 1989, thousands of people came to celebrate at the Brandenburg Gate, which served as a symbol of freedom and unity. The passage served as a border crossing as of December 1989, until Germany officially reunified in October 1990. The monument was completely refurbished in 2000.



Famous meeting point

Today, tourists all go to Pariser Platz to get their picture of Berlin's famous monument. It is also the location of several large events, whether for protests or parties, such as on New Year's Eve. During football championships, tens of thousands of people gather on the "fan mile" to watch the games and celebrate together.



Dramatic lighting effects

The Brandenburg Gate offers a remarkable backdrop for lighting effects during the Festival of Lights, held this year from October 7-16. After different terrorist attacks, colored tributes to the victims have also illuminated the gate, such as here after the Orlando attacks on a gay club. On January 5, 2015, its lights were all turned off to protest against a far-right Pegida demonstration.



Hope for the future

Current events are a constant reminder of the fragility of peace - or "Frieden" in German, as projected on the monument during the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Wall in 2014. Having witnessed and survived the most dreadful and joyful periods of Europe's last 225 years of history, the Brandenburg Gate remains a symbol of hope for the centuries to come.

Author: Elizabeth Grenier

It is a must-see on every respectable tourist's checklist in Berlin. The Brandenburg Gate on Pariser Platz has found its way on countless selfies.

It welcomes exhausted runners at the end of the Berlin Marathon, tens of thousands of dedicated football fans during the World Cup, and celebrates with fireworks and the popping bottles of champagne of international visitors on New Year's Eve.

It shows solidarity with the world after terrorist attacks and greets demonstrations from all imaginable political directions.

The famous landmark is also part of Berlin's official logo and is reproduced hundreds of times on the windows of the U-Bahn.

It represents Berlin's tumultuous history more than any other monument: Built as a tribute to peace, it quickly turned into the showplace of wars. It managed to survive the most destructive one, World War II, to spend several decades in the death strip of the Cold War. Finally, it was still standing to celebrate with all Berliners the fall of the Wall in 1989. It now remains the symbol of the reunification of Germany.