

Course title:	Twentieth Century Berlin: People, Places, Words
Instructor:	Lauren Van Vuuren, Ph.D.
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Track:	A-Track
Language of instruction:	English
Contact hours:	48 (6 per day)
ECTS credits:	6
Prerequisites:	Students should be able to speak and read English at the upper intermediate level (B2) or higher. Interest in Berlin, and its extraordinary recent past.

Course description

This course is about Berlin, the city that was at the epicenter of the defining catastrophes of the twentieth century, including the First World War, the horror of the Nazi era that resulted in the Second World War and the Holocaust, and the long grubby Cold War that saw the city physically divided between capitalism and communism in an embodiment of the conflict between the American and Soviet worlds.

Yet amidst these horrors (and arguably because of them), Berlin was also a place where some of the most boundary breaking avant-garde art, progressive politics and anarchic subcultures of the twentieth century bloomed and died in the furnace of its constantly changing social, political and economic turmoil.

The livid imprint of this tormented history marks Berlin up until today, and demands to be known, studied and understood,

With this urgency in mind, in this course we examine the history of twentieth century Berlin through various lenses: the biographies of individuals, the words of writers who bore witness to the vertiginous social, political and physical changes the city underwent, and buildings and monuments whose physical construction, destruction and reconstruction reflected the ideological turmoil and conflict of those immense hundred years.

Famous Berliners we will meet include the murdered Communist leader Rosa Luxemburg, the artist Käthe Kollwitz, the actress Marlene Dietrich, the Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, the adopted Berliner David Bowie and the famous East German dissident musician Wolf Biermann. The contextualized stories of these individuals will offer us unique perspectives politically, artistically and socially into the tumult and struggle that marked their times in the city. These figures occupy a range of different position(s): as Berliners, as radicals, as artists of resistance to or collaboration with Nazism, and Communism, as drifters and exiles whose stories reflect Berlin's unique position in the twentieth century as 'no man's land, frontier, a city adrift in the sands of Central Europe.'

In a similar way, we will examine the words of writers who bore witness to the extremism and societal upheaval that marked twentieth century Berlin. From the witnessing of Roth and

Isherwood to life in Weimar and Nazi Berlin, to the social and political commentary by Christa Wolf on the moral struggles of life lived on different sides of the Berlin Wall, we will assess their writings in their historical contexts. We will assess their words as evocations of Berlin, but also as potential or overt acts of resistance to the extremism they lived under, that attempted to maintain a solidarity with the idea of Berlin as a place of artistic and social freedom and permissiveness.

Finally, we will examine some of the places in Berlin whose physical building, destruction and rebuilding can be situated in the wider systems of ideology, power and social relations that so cataclysmically defined the physical landscape of Berlin after 1933. In this, we will focus on the story of Potsdamer Platz, the Palace of the People (Palast der Republik) and the central site in Berlin for the mourning and remembrance of the Jewish Genocide by Nazi Germany, the Holocaust Memorial in Mitte.

This course does not seek to provide a 'grand narrative' of Berlin's twentieth century history. Instead, it follows a thread that weaves through the history: the thread left behind by those who bore witness to their times. By tracing the stories of contemporary witnesses, left for us in books, films and songs, and in the physical construction of the city, we open up a human dimension that enriches and challenges our understanding of Berlin's traumatic recent history.

Structured largely chronologically, the course will work with films and novels whilst building on a clear historiographical base provided in class seminars. The teaching will be augmented by physical excursions into Berlin to trace the stories we encounter and class discussions will form the basis for a seminar paper that students will be required to submit at the end of the course. This history course approaches the story of Berlin through the reflections and refractions of individual humans' lives who struggled upon the immense stage of a city at the very symbolic and literal heart of the catastrophes of the twentieth century.

Student profile

This course is for university level students with open minds and incurable curiosity about the world around them.

Course requirements

Attendance in class and the careful reading of the assigned course materials are most important. The reading pack will be divided into compulsory and supplementary readings. Furthermore, the course will require participation in the field trips, engaged discussion of the material in class that shows you have completed the required reading, and the completion of a final paper on a topic related to the course but decided by yourself in discussion with the lecturer. Guidelines for the papers as well as suggested topics will be distributed during the first session. The instructor will be available for student consultations should any further guidance be required.

Required language skills

The language of instruction is English. Language proficiency on an advanced intermediate level (B2) is a prerequisite for participation. For orientation purposes, you can assess your language skills here (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168045bb52>

Attendance

Each class consists of six teaching modules (45 minutes each). If you miss 6 modules (unexcused), your final course grade will drop by one grade. Coming more than 20 minutes late counts as one missed module (this also applies to excursion days). If you come late to class six times (up to 20 minutes) your entire course grade will also drop by one grade. If you miss 14 modules or more (unexcused), you will fail the class. Excused absences, such as those with medical documentation, do not count toward these totals.

Grading

Class participation: 20%

Short presentation: 20%

Research paper: 60%

'Class Participation' will include participation in field trips and engagement in discussion in class. 'Short Presentation' will be a brief presentation whereby students will describe the topic they have chosen for their research paper, and link their choice to themes in the course that they have found interesting. It will provide a useful chance for feedback and discussion within the group as a whole.

Readings

A digital reader will be provided.

Course schedule

Date	Program*
Monday, July 20, 2026	<p>Introduction Session: Setting the Scene</p> <p>Revolutionary Berlin 1918: The Artist and The Activist</p> <p>Rosa Luxemburg and Käthe Kollwitz</p> <p>Readings:</p> <p>David Clay Large, Berlin (Basic Books, 2000), introduction</p> <p>Claire C. Whitner, 'Käthe Kollwitz and the Krieg Cycle', Käthe Kollwitz and the Women of War (Yale University Press), 2016</p>
Thursday, July 23, 2026	<p>The Weimar Years: Literary Witnesses</p> <p>Joseph Roth and Christopher Isherwood</p> <p>Readings:</p> <p>Extracts from Joseph Roth, What I saw: Reports from Berlin 1920 - 1933 (London, 2013: Granta Books)</p> <p>Class trip: Kollwitzplatz and Neue Wache</p>

Monday, July 27, 2026	<p>Nazi Berlin: The Actress and the Filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl and Marlene Dietrich</p> <p>Readings: Rory Maclean, <i>Imagine a City</i> (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2014), pp. 199 - 235</p> <p>Screening: <i>The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl</i> (1993)</p>
Thursday, July 30, 2026	<p>The Divided City: The Berlin Airlift of 1948 - 1949 An examination of the 'Cuban Missile Crises' of its day that placed Berlin in the eye of the Cold War storm. We look specifically at the propaganda aspects of the Airlift and how the success of America and Britain in keeping West Berlin fed despite Stalin's Iron Curtain led inevitably to the building of the Berlin Wall 12 years later.</p> <p>Readings: George Clare, <i>Berlin Days</i> (Macmillan London Limited, 1989), 91 - 108</p> <p>Class Trip: Tempelhof Airport</p>
Monday, August 3, 2026	<p>The Divided Heaven: Literature as Resistance in East Berlin Christa Wolf</p> <p>Readings: Extracts from Christa Wolf, <i>The Divided Heaven</i> (University of Ottawa Press, 2013) Fulbrook, Mary. "Popular Discontent and Political Activism in the GDR." <i>Contemporary European History</i>, vol. 2, no. 3, 1993, pp. 265–82</p> <p>Screening: <i>The Lives of Others</i> (2006)</p>
Thursday, August 6, 2026	<p>Dreamers and Dissidents in East and West Berlin David Bowie and Wolf Biermann</p> <p>Readings: Extracts from Stuart Braun, <i>City of Exiles: Berlin from the Outside In</i>, (Berlin 2015, Noctua Press) Jeff Hayton, 'Härte gegen Punk: Popular Music, Western Media, and State Response in the German Democratic Republic' in <i>German History</i>, Vol. 31, No. 4, pp. 523-549</p> <p>Class Trip: Assisi Panorama at Checkpoint Charlie and the Topography of Terror</p>

Monday, August 10, 2026	<p>After the Wall: Rebuilding Berlin after 1989</p> <p>Palace of the Republic (Palast der Republik), Potsdamer Platz, the Holocaust Memorial</p> <p>Readings:</p> <p>Extracts from Brian Ladd, <i>The Ghosts of Berlin</i>, (University of Chicago Press, 1997)</p> <p>Extracts from Peter Schneider, <i>Berlin Now</i>, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014)</p> <p>Class Trip: Holocaust Memorial</p>
Thursday, August 13, 2026	<p>The Gentrification Wars: 2000 – the Present</p> <p>Final class discussion and submission of papers.</p>

*Field trips are subject to change depending on the availability of appointments and speakers. On field trip days, class hours may be adjusted.