

Berlin Trip Article

In April, a group of 40 students consisting of Lower Sixth and Fifth year pupils studying History, MIA and German travelled to Berlin to undertake a very full programme of visits to enhance the learning which takes place in the classroom. We travelled to Berlin on Wednesday and spent our first full day in the German capital visiting Sachsenhausen, a concentration camp designed by the Nazis to detain their political rivals and enemies of the state. Later, this camp was liberated by the Soviets and used to hold prisoners of war. The sheer size of the camp and the callousness of its methods of execution helped enormously to understand the real-life impact of the Nazi regime which we had been studying for months beforehand. From Sachsenhausen we went to visit the Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe, which is set in the heart of Berlin and close to the Brandenburg Gate. This was particularly interesting as everyone interpreted the memorial in different ways. The memorial itself is a series of large grey blocks varying in sizes and shapes. Visitors are given the freedom to walk between them and think about the meaning behind the memorial. Very few people had the same interpretation. When I was walking between the blocks I noticed that they started off small, before gradually getting bigger, only to decrease in size again. For me this represented the gradualist nature of the holocaust and the smaller blocks towards the end emphasised that no matter how bad thing get, there is always hope at the end of the tunnel. The Jewish people never lost faith.

The second day of our trip started with a guided visit of the Wall Memorial in Bernauer Strasse. Like Checkpoint Charlie, the name given by the Western Allies to the best-known Berlin Wall crossing point between East and West Berlin, Bernauer Strasse became a symbol of the Cold War, representing the separation of East and West. The remaining parts of the Berlin wall, which are very visible, highlight the clear divide caused by the impact of the Allies and the Soviet Union on Berlin. We left Bernauer Strasse to travel to Hohenschönhausen, the Stasi prison, where we had an informative guide who told us of the various methods of torture used by the intelligence wing of the Stasi. Of course, between these two events we were given plenty of time for shopping and the sampling of German delicacies, such as Currywust. To finish off our day we had a tour of the underground bunkers built during the most intense period of the Cold War. The bunkers were designed to protect civilians from the possibility of a nuclear war and was a real eye-opener. As we walked through the various sections of the bunkers, we got to experience first-hand the cramped and unsanitary conditions that civilians would have had to live in, had nuclear war been declared. It really made us appreciate the availability of fresh food and fresh air.

Our third day in Berlin was just as eventful and began with a visit to the Topography of Terror. This is an exhibition with lots of information about the Soviet Secret Police and their underground torture chambers. We were free to wander about individually and take in the many interactive displays. However, there was so much information we never could have seen it all! After a tasty lunch at the Potsdamer Platz, the group made its way to the Berlin Film Museum where Mr O'Labradha gave a very detailed and enthusiastic tour of the various exhibits. He explained the development of German film and how it impacted heavily the genre of horror. I think it is safe to say this was definitely the highlight of the trip for him! The film museum was certainly very interesting and it was fulfilling to learn about Germany's culture as well as its history.

When we had learnt all there was to learn about German cinema, we moved on to the Reichstag: the country's government. This was certainly the highlight of the trip for me and our tour guide was meticulous in his explanation of the ins and outs of German politics. We saw almost every room in the building and even got to view the debating chamber. Transparency was emphasised as a key factor throughout, which is a very admirable concept. This value is further underlined by the glass dome on top of the building, which you can walk around, and from where you can see down into the debating

chamber. The view of Berlin's skyline was spectacular and was accompanied by a headset audio which commented on various aspects of the Reichstag and the surrounding area. We were all thoroughly exhausted after this jam-packed day and were delighted to finally sit down for dinner in Andy's Diner where we enjoyed burgers.

Our final day in Berlin began with a self-guided tour of the German History Museum. With a large quantity of information spanning a massive range of years, this kept us all occupied and reading for the next few hours. Mr Roulston was also very happy to provide extra contextual information and even quizzed us all afterwards! Finally, we concluded our trip to Berlin with a bike tour around the city. We saw many sights including the Brandenburg Gate and the University of Berlin, and received very detailed and interesting commentary from our guides. Despite a few crashes and bumps in the first half hour, the bike tour was very enjoyable and went smoothly for the remainder of the three hours. We were even treated to an intricate depiction of the Cold War in chalk on the pavement! However, all good things must come to an end and, after we handed out bikes back, it was time to head to the airport and go home. Overall, the Berlin trip was great as we got to experience the past and the present of one of the most influential cities in Europe. The trip also helped create new friendships as well as strengthening already existing ones.

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