

FEATURED ARTICLE: THE PRESENT IS HISTORY

## Whither Prussia? Berlin's Humboldt Forum and the Afterlife of a Vanished State

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### Abstract

From its very conception some thirty years ago, Berlin's Humboldt Forum has been one of contemporary Germany's most controversial cultural initiatives. One aspect of this controversy has been the role of the Prussian past in reunified Germany. Housed in a reconstruction of the Prussian Royal Palace destroyed by the East German communist government in 1950, the visual symbolism of the project spurred a long struggle over the appropriate urban aesthetic for the country's capital city. In the view of many critics, the structure symbolizes the triumph of a particular conservative narrative of national memory that excludes the GDR, downplays National Socialism, and uncritically celebrates the Prussian past. This article traces how public debates about the structure of the Humboldt Forum have served as a vehicle for reflection on Prussian history and its relevance (or irrelevance) for reunified Germany.

**Keywords:** Humboldt Forum; Berlin; Prussia; memory

From its very conception more than thirty years ago, Berlin's Humboldt Forum has been one of contemporary Germany's most controversial cultural initiatives. Back in the early 1990s, the prospect of a Prussian Royal Palace (*Schloss*) resurfacing in the historic heart of reunified Germany's capital city was ridiculed by critics as a conservative indulgence in imperial nostalgia. The ensuing demolition of the GDR-era *Palast der Republik* to make way for the restored *Schloss* in turn triggered complaints that the project aimed to literally erase the communist past from Berlin's streetscapes. And now, with the €677 million<sup>1</sup> museum project complete and open to the public (fig. 1), critical attention has increasingly been drawn to the colonial exhibits displayed in the forum itself.<sup>2</sup> The cumulative result has been, on the one hand, a wave of vigorous public discussions about some largely unexamined features of the German past, and, on the other, frustration at some missed chances to adapt the purposes of the Humboldt Forum to the urgent cultural needs of the twenty-first century.

The public debates surrounding the Humboldt Forum are legion and touch upon numerous currents in contemporary German culture.<sup>3</sup> Rather than providing a synoptic view of

<sup>1</sup> "Berliner Humboldt-Forum wird weitere 33 Millionen Euro teurer," *rbb*, October 23, 2020 (<https://www.rbb24.de/kultur/beitrag/2020/10/berliner-humboldt-forum-wird-wieder-teurer-33-millionen.html>).

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most critically, the question of repatriating artifacts removed from West Africa in the nineteenth century has elicited a number of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*-type discussions about how today's Germany ought to confront a long-suppressed colonial history. See for example Jonathan Bach, "Colonial Pasts in Germany's Present," *German Politics and Society* 37, no. 4 (2019): 58–73; Jeremiah J. Garsha, "Expanding *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*? German Repatriation of Colonial Artefacts and Human Remains," *Journal of Genocide Research* 22, no. 1 (2020): 46–61; H. Glenn Penny, *In Humboldt's Shadow: A Tragic History of German Ethnology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> For some recent academic contributions to these discussions, see Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, "The Reconstructed City Palace and Humboldt Forum in Berlin: Restoring Architectural Identity or Distorting the



**Figure 1.** The western facade of the Humboldt Forum. On the right is the former GDR Council of Ministers building, in which the Fourth Portal of the former Royal Palace was reconstructed. Photo by author, summer 2020.

these discussions and the ways in which they have evolved and mutated over the past three decades, however, this article takes as its prism of focus one particularly neglected aspect of the *Schloss* debates: the legacy of Prussia. Because the most prominent public narratives about the forum have tended to center on other concerns—the urban form of central Berlin, the fate of East German symbols in reunified Germany, the value of reconstructing long-vanished historical structures, the urgency of a full public reckoning with Germany’s colonial history—analyses of the meanings of the Humboldt Forum for contemporary Germany have tended to allow the question of the Prussian past to fall between the cracks. The following article sets out to correct this picture. Prussia’s presences and absences in the debates about the Humboldt Forum, it seeks to demonstrate, were intimately related to the panoply of conflicting desires about the visual symbolism of reunified Germany expressed throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. In particular, when it came to the difficult question of which aspects of the past could and should be articulated and monumentalized in aesthetic form, Prussia was very often a critical subject. At stake here were, on the one side, a critical perspective that held “Prussia” as a latent and ever-dangerous political force in contemporary Germany and, on the other, one that held Prussia’s “pastness” to be an irrevocable historical fact. On the margins, meanwhile, were those who continued to praise the Prussian state and champion the “virtues” that allegedly inhered within it. The Humboldt Forum, in other words, became something of a test case of whether Prussia could or could not, finally, be considered a “normal” part of German history.

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The Prussian state met a dishonorable end after the Second World War, condemned by the Allied Control Council as the abiding “bearer of militarism and reaction in Germany” and by historiography as the force that had fatally distorted Germany’s path to modernity.

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Memory of Historic Spaces?,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 25, no. 4 (2017): 441–54; Friedrich von Bose, “Strategische Reflexivität: Das Berliner Humboldt Forum und die postkoloniale Kritik,” *Historische Anthropologie* 25, no. 3 (2017): 409–17; Daniel Morat, “Katalysator wider Willen. Das Humboldt Forum in Berlin und die deutsche Kolonialvergangenheit,” *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 16, no. 1 (2019): 140–53; Christiane Steckenbiller, “Berlin’s Colonial Legacies and New Minority Histories: The Case of the Humboldt Forum and Colonial Street Names in the German Capital,” *Monatshefte* 111, no. 1 (2019): 99–116.

This historical *auto-da-fé* was accompanied by—indeed, *demanded*—a reductive image of the Prussian state defined overwhelmingly by its militaristic and imperialistic character. Prussia’s uniquely aggressive spirit, so ran the argument, had passed on uninterrupted from the “Solider King” Friedrich Wilhelm I, through Frederick the Great, Bismarck, and Kaiser Wilhelm II, and up to the would-be Prussian Adolf Hitler. “De-prussification” was accordingly a central component of the postwar reeducation program.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, despite the air of shame in which the state was erased from the map of Europe, “Prussia” remained a conservative touchstone in the Federal Republic in the decades following 1945. Few openly advocated Prussia’s actual restitution, to be sure. But many on the political right held the so-called Prussian virtues—“discipline, moderation, duty and self-sacrifice”<sup>5</sup>—to possess an ongoing vitality as spiritual ballast against the dangers of rampant materialism, individualism, and consumerism. At the same time, Prussia remained a taboo for left liberals, who feared that any continued veneration of Prussian traditions could resuscitate a runaway militarism that risked undoing completely the fragile democratic project of the Federal Republic. This, then, was less a question of the *actual* relationship between National Socialism and the Prussian state than one about the longer-term continuities of German history and the country’s apparent predisposition to aggression, expansion, and militarism. In the late 1970s and 1980s, these tensions came to a head, as Prussia rather suddenly became the subject of a major historical reckoning in both German states. Cultural landmarks such as the immensely successful West Berlin exhibition “Preußen—Versuch einer Bilanz” (1981), Sebastian Haffner’s bestselling *Preußen ohne Legende* (1979), and the East German historian Ingrid Mittenzwei’s biography of Frederick the Great (1979) suggested that Germans on both sides of the Berlin Wall still found something alluring about the Prussian past.<sup>6</sup> Faced with these attempts to tease out the nuances, contradictions and, indeed, “positive” sides of Prussian history, Prussia’s apparent renaissance in the German cultural imagination generated no shortage of controversy. Hans Ulrich-Wehler—the Federal Republic’s leading scholarly champion of the *Sonderweg* thesis—railed against what he saw as a cowardly flight from the troubles of the present into “a nostalgic, trivialized Prussia.”<sup>7</sup> On the other side of the Berlin Wall, meanwhile, the Socialist Unity Party (SED) fought vainly to defend itself against the charge that it had cynically resurrected the once-reviled militarist, dynastic Prussian past as an illiberal, despotic historical prototype.<sup>8</sup>

Only a decade after both German states had undergone an unexpectedly profound reckoning with the long legacy of the Prussian state, then, it might hardly have seemed like a neutral statement to decorate the symbolic center of the reunified country with an unmistakable emblem of Prussian royal power. And yet, one of the most curious facts in the remarkable story about the reconstruction of the Berlin *Schloss* is the way that it failed to stimulate any substantial mainstream controversies about the place of Prussia in the politics and culture of the New Germany. While in 1990 Germans might have seen good reason to brace themselves for a renewed reckoning with the complex and contradictory patrimony of the state that had executed Germany’s first unification in 1870–1871, Prussia actually, as Gavriel D. Rosenfeld notes, “seemed to diminish as a source of controversy” as the decade

<sup>4</sup> Marcus Colla, “Constructing the Prussia-Myth in East Germany, 1945–61,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 54, no. 3 (2019): 527–50; Riccarda Torriani, “Nazis into Germans: Re-education and Democratisation in the British and French Occupation Zones, 1945–1949” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> T. C. W. Blanning, “The Death and Transfiguration of Prussia,” *The Historical Journal* 29, no. 2 (1986): 444.

<sup>6</sup> Gottfried Korff and Winfried Ranke (eds), *Preussen—Versuch einer Bilanz. Eine Ausstellung der Berliner Festspiele GmbH, 15. August–15. November 1981*, Exhibition Catalogue (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981); Sebastian Haffner, *Preußen ohne Legende* (Hamburg: Gruner und Jahr, 1978); Ingrid Mittenzwei, *Friedrich II. von Preußen. Eine Biographie* (East Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Ulrich Wehler, “Preußen ist wieder chic...,” in *Preußen ist wieder chic. Politik und Polemik in zwanzig Essays*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 18.

<sup>8</sup> This subject is explored further in Marcus Colla, *Prussia in the Historical Culture of the German Democratic Republic: Communists and Kings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

unfolded.<sup>9</sup> Rosenfeld maintains that Prussia emerged out of the “Prussia Wave” of the 1970s and 1980s as a relatively “neutralized” and “normal” component of German history.<sup>10</sup> Shorn of “many of its former stigmas,” the Prussian past increasingly became typified by “consensus” rather than “controversy.”<sup>11</sup> But consensus, we know, can be fragile, and Rosenfeld is careful to point out that the thread connecting Prussia to the Nazis was never severed completely. If much of the heat had been taken out of the Prussian past as a source of public controversy, the name “Prussia” nevertheless continued to conjure a certain feeling of unease. Fearing that the disappearance of Prussia from the frontline of Germany’s *geschichtspolitische* discussions would inevitably lead to the history of German militarism and imperialism being relativized, critics fought to ensure that it remained a “live” subject.<sup>12</sup> The most empathic demonstration of these efforts was the controversy that accompanied the ceremonial reburial of Frederick the Great and the Solider King Friedrich Wilhelm I in Potsdam in August 1991. Throughout the Cold War era, the bodies of these Prussian kings had rested at the *Burg Hohenzollern* in Baden-Württemberg. Their return to Potsdam just months after Germany’s reunification triggered a groundswell of denunciations and protests on the part of left-wing groups, who perceived the event as signaling a renewed veneration of old-Prussian militarism.<sup>13</sup> The prominence of uniformed *Bundeswehr* soldiers and the presence of Chancellor Helmut Kohl (even if only in the capacity of a “private citizen”) were sources of particular exasperation.<sup>14</sup> The *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) attacked the ceremony as “a *geschichtspolitische* demonstration of high symbolic value,”<sup>15</sup> while in the Brandenburg parliament, the former East German opposition group *Bündnis 90* protested that “it is not the enlightened spirit of Friedrich II that shall drift over the grave during the reburial ceremony, as the military apparently desires, but that unholy (*unselig*) spirit that thrust Germany into such an endless abyss (*unendliche Tiefe*).”<sup>16</sup> The fear expressed by these groups was that the country’s conservative leadership, the winds of change in their sails, had once again begun dreaming about a muscular and militant Germany.

## Absence

Given this volatile cultural-political backdrop, it might seem curious that the initial debates surrounding the reconstruction of the Berlin *Schloss* never managed to trigger any real kind of emotional engagement with Prussia and its place in the New Germany. Why was this? As the following section seeks to show, the principal reason why the Prussian past was quickly squeezed to the discursive margins of the *Schloss* debates in the 1990s and early 2000s had less to do with any willful historical silence than with the way that public discussions on the subject during the critical post-reunification years instead gravitated toward rather specific questions about urban form. What might have proved an additional unstable element thrown

<sup>9</sup> Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, “A Mastered Past? Prussia in Postwar German Memory,” *German History* 22, no. 4 (2004): 518. It is a view echoed in Herfried Münkler, *Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2009), 222.

<sup>10</sup> Rosenfeld, “A Mastered Past,” 507.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenfeld, “A Mastered Past,” 507.

<sup>12</sup> These thoughts relate to Martin Sabrow’s notion of “contemporary history” as a sense of the past defined by a particular temporality that is oriented to “the intensity of memory or by the public confrontation with the past as a mix of memory and knowledge”; Martin Sabrow, *Die Zeit der Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012), 12.

<sup>13</sup> See Hans Bentzien, *Die Heimkehr der Preussenkönige* (Berlin: Volk & Welt, 1991). The event and the accompanying protests are documented in “Friedrichs Heimfahrt. Umbettungszeremonie in Potsdam,” *Spiegel TV*, August 18, 1991 (<https://www.spiegel.de/video/friedrichs-heimfahrt-video-99009916.html>). Though the event generated a great deal of debate in the press, the protests themselves failed to attract the numbers anticipated by organizers; see V. Punzel, “Proteste gegen Ehrung der Könige,” *Märkische Allgemeine*, August 17, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Kohl’s attendance at the event also generated criticism from within his own party; see “Nun auch CDU-Kritik an Kohls Potsdam-Besuch,” *Berliner Zeitung*, August 5, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> “SPD befürchtet Wiederaufleben altpreußischer Tradition,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, July 30, 1991.

<sup>16</sup> Fraktion Bündnis 90 im Landtag Brandenburg, “Die Gebeine der Hohenzollern. Presseinformation,” July 17, 1991.

into the restless collision chamber of Germany's memory culture was ultimately eclipsed by more pressing discussions about "managing" the East German past, "authenticity" in heritage practices, and, above all, the urban aesthetics of the reunified country's capital city.

Discussions about developing an appropriate urban aesthetic for reunified Germany played out in regional and local contexts all across the former East after 1990. But in the case of the Humboldt Forum, they were amplified to a degree of national—even international—significance. As the historic center of Berlin, the importance of the space far transcended any of the individual political regimes that had occupied it. Indeed, the site's history supremely exemplifies the relentless cycle of demolition, construction, and reconstruction that marks out Berlin as an especially dynamic and multifaceted contemporary urban palimpsest. In the past seventy-five years alone, the space has witnessed four complete transformations in content and purpose: firstly, the destruction of the original *Schloss* in 1950 and the subsequent conversion of the vacant space into the GDR's signature "Red Square" parade venue; secondly, the erection of the *Palast der Republik* in 1976; thirdly, the demolition of the *Palast* thirty years later; and, now, the triumphant return of the vanished *Schloss*. Each of these events was an occasion for public bloodletting. In the German capital, as one journalist has astutely observed, "the act of demolition is just as politically and emotionally charged as the act of construction."<sup>17</sup>

But even within the riotously unpredictable environment of Berlin's urban culture, the resurrection of the city's Royal Palace is a most unlikely story. The project has its origins in a civic initiative forged after the fall of the GDR by the Hamburg tractor merchant Wilhelm von Boddien, a Pomeranian by birth. As a young man in the 1960s, Boddien recalls, he developed a private passion for the destroyed Palace, at a time when millions of jubilant workers, soldiers, students, and Thälmann Pioneers annually marched atop its medieval foundations, still buried deep beneath the asphalt.<sup>18</sup> With the foundation of his *Förderverein Berliner Schloss* in 1991, Boddien's personal Palace fetish quickly found a receptive audience—most notably (though not exclusively) among conservatives. Among the earliest enthusiasts for the proposal could be counted the author and publicist Joachim Fest and the legendary Berlin publisher Wolf Jobst Siedler.<sup>19</sup>

The great PR breakthrough of the *Förderverein* came in 1993, with the erection of a life-sized mock facade of the old *Schloss* in front of the now-vacant *Palast*.<sup>20</sup> Composed of some 10,000 square meters of canvas produced by a team of 150 artists under the stewardship of Catherine Feff, the *trompe l'oeil* restored the full spatial dimensions of the *Schloss* into the streetscape of central Berlin. As Boddien explained at the time:

He who is not accustomed to thinking spatially can imagine the reality only with difficulty based on small-scale models. Moreover, only the older—and thus the smaller—part of today's Berliners knew the *Schloss* first-hand. Hence, we had the idea to resurrect, for a limited time, the *Schloss* in its original scale.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Matt Frei, *Berlin. Episode Two: Ruined Visions* (BBC, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> "Mittag mit Wilhelm von Boddien," *Berliner Morgenpost*, October 15, 2014 (<https://www.morgenpost.de/prin-tarchiv/leute/article133284776/Wilhelm-von-Boddien.html>); see also "Wilhelm v. Boddien. Wer ist der Mann, dem Berlin seine neue, alte Mitte verdankt?—Ein Porträt" *Preußische Allgemeine*, September 28, 2002 (<http://www.webarchiv-server.de/pin/archiv02/3902ob37.htm>). Von Boddien's story is told in detail in Veronika Zickendraht, *Der Stoff, aus dem die Schlösser sind. Der Wiederaufbau des Berliner Schlosses. Wie Wilhelm von Boddien eine verrückte Idee wahr machte* (Aslar: Adeo, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Joachim Fest, "Denkmal der Baugeschichte und verlorene Mitte Berlins. Das Neue Berlin Schloss oder Parkplatz? Plädoyer für den Wiederaufbau des Schlüterschen Stadtschloss," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 30, 1990; Wolf Jobst Siedler, "Plädoyer für das Berliner Stadtschloss," *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, April 2, 1992; Wolf Jobst Siedler, "Das Schloss lag nicht in Berlin—Berlin war das Schloss," 1992 (<https://berliner-schloss.de/das-historische-schloss/das-schloss-lag-nicht-in-berlin-berlin-war-das-schloss/>).

<sup>20</sup> "Schattenwurf auf Polyester," *Der Spiegel*, June 23, 1993, 225.

<sup>21</sup> Wilhelm von Boddien, "Vorwort," in *Das Schloss? Eine Ausstellung über die Mitte Berlins* ed. Förderverein Berliner Stadtschloss (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1993), 7.

The effect was to demonstrate how powerfully the form of the original structure had influenced the design and arrangement of its surroundings:

The Berlin *Schloss* was the crown and the central axis-point of old Berlin. The proportions (*Maßstäblichkeit*) of classic Berlin oriented themselves to the *Schloss*, and in the context of its architecture an ensemble of the utmost elegance and tightness (*Spannung*) developed.... The *Schloss* dominated the city [and] the city oriented itself towards the *Schloss*. It was the heart of Berlin.... Now it is time to close the void in the ensemble of classic Berlin once more, to give it back its middle point and its keystone and to rehabilitate it in its totality.<sup>22</sup>

Not only did this audacious visual spectacle draw a great deal of public attention to the project and help catapult the *Schloss* discussion far beyond the narrow circles of the *Förderverein*, but it also helped set the contours of the public debate that followed. Cautious to avoid the charge that the reconstruction of the Berlin *Schloss* represented nothing more than a sentimental effort to recapture the visual spirit of Prussia's regal *Glanz und Gloria*, proponents of the project from the very outset placed a particular emphasis on the importance of pure urban form; on "restoring" the lost visual harmony of Berlin's historic core. As the chair of the *Förderverein* Richard Schröder later put it, a *Schlossplatz* without a *Schloss* was like a "joke without a punchline."<sup>23</sup> Boddien himself was emphatic that his vision was devoid of political intentions: "I'm not interested in politics, but in aesthetics."<sup>24</sup> It was the same kind of impulse that could drive Hannes Swoboda, chairman of the "International Experts Commission for the Historical Center of Berlin,"<sup>25</sup> to state in 2001: "We're not rebuilding barracks, we're reconstructing an artwork."<sup>26</sup>

Critics—not least those on the left—saw this line of argument as duplicitous. The architect Bruno Flierl lamented that, through the relentless emphasis on urban aesthetics, the restored palace was being made "more and more [into] a national symbol of German culture," while at the same time "not a word" was being said about the "victories and defeats in the Prussian and German wars caused by the lords of the Berlin *Schloss*."<sup>27</sup> In a 1992 debate with Siedler, the art historian Tilmann Buddensieg sounded a warning about the impression that would be generated by the proposed reconstruction, which in his view "would push the symbolic character, the memory of this Prussian, European *Machtstaat*, forward onto the stage." For his part, Siedler categorically denied that the project was animated by any conservative nostalgia for the Prussian state: "Ah, this Prussia you are thinking about now," he responded, "it's really disappeared, also geographically."<sup>28</sup>

Despite the protests advanced by the likes of Flierl and Buddensieg, privileging urban aesthetics ultimately proved to be a remarkably effective strategy. The debates that unfolded during the 1990s concentrated on a number of aspects of the *Schloss* proposal: cost, function, "authenticity," the memory politics of the GDR, but only peripherally on questions of Prussian symbolism. In a telling testament to the widespread view that contemporary architecture was ill equipped to capture and do justice to the historic and symbolic gravity of the

<sup>22</sup> Wilhelm von Boddien, 'Architektur ist der Genius des Planes—von Baumeistern in Materie umgesetzt,' in *Das Schloss?*, 82–83.

<sup>23</sup> René Nehring, "Mehr als wir erträumt hatten," *Preußische Allgemeine*, March 30, 2020 (<https://paz.de/artikel/mehr-als-wir-ertraeumt-hatten-a521.html>).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Beate Binder, *Streitfall Stadtmitte. Der Berliner Schlossplatz* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009), 179.

<sup>25</sup> *Internationale Expertenkommission Historische Mitte Berlin*.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Binder, *Streitfall Stadtmitte*, 174.

<sup>27</sup> Bruno Flierl, "Abriss des Palastes zur Schaffung von Platz für den Schloss-Neubau. Das Schloss der Bundesrepublik, 2002–2008," in *Mitte Spreeinsel in Berlin—ein Ort historische Brüche. Eine Ausstellung der Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung* (Berlin: Dietz, 2009), 16.

<sup>28</sup> Mathias Schreiber und Jürgen Hohmeyer, "Es herrscht totale Wüste. Die Architekturkritiker Buddensieg und Siedler streiten über den Wiederaufbau des Berliner Stadtschlosses," *Der Spiegel* 51, no. 46 (December 13, 1992): 206.

site, professional planners and architectural critics often found themselves out of step with public opinion on the matter. Although *they* may largely have despised the *Schloss* initiative,<sup>29</sup> it quickly gained traction among the wider population, and not just in Berlin.<sup>30</sup> Hence, rather than directly attacking the politics that they suspected lurked behind the proposals, opponents of the reconstruction instead began concentrating their energies on highlighting the absence of any practicable function for the proposed structure.<sup>31</sup> In the early 1990s, ideas were put forward to use the reconstructed *Schloss* as a museum, as a new federal chancellery, as a library, as a seat for the federal president, as the Foreign Ministry, and as a cultural center, among others.<sup>32</sup> It was only in the year 2000 that the “Humboldt Forum” concept began to assume any meaningful shape.

At the same time, the debates about the resurrected *Schloss* in the 1990s must also be understood as one manifestation of a much longer cultural transformation concerning the role of built heritage in Germany’s urban spaces. Indeed, the attraction of a Prussian monument stripped of its troubling political connotations and reduced to a mere aesthetic spectacle had even been apparent in the GDR: a place where one may intuitively expect all major urban decisions to be steeped in political meaning. If the memoirs of the senior East German television official Eberhard Fensch are to be believed, one of the earliest proponents of reconstructing the Berlin Palace was Günter Mittag, a leading member of the SED *Politbüro*. Fresh from being exposed to the dazzling state splendor on display in Madrid and Paris in the late 1980s, Fensch recalls, a despondent Erich Honecker had lamented the fact that Walter Ulbricht’s decision to demolish the *Schloss* in 1950 had left the GDR’s capital devoid of magnificent ceremonial spaces.<sup>33</sup> “Stately representation,” Honecker had apparently avowed, “promotes the patriotism of the people.” “In all seriousness” Mittag then suggested rebuilding the *Schloss* for this very purpose. Though not fully convinced, Honecker agreed to consider the idea.<sup>34</sup>

Whatever the veracity of Fensch’s story, it reveals an important point about the longer-term cultural shifts in urban thinking that ultimately rendered possible such an audacious project as the reconstruction of Berlin’s Royal Palace. Honecker’s apparent receptiveness to a reconstruction on purely visual grounds is suggestive of a profound and well-documented transformation from the 1970s that came to privilege historical aesthetics (and indeed monumentality) over the uncompromising modernist functionality that had dominated planning paradigms in both socialist and nonsocialist Europe for the previous twenty years.<sup>35</sup> In particular, the transfer of power from Ulbricht to Honecker in 1971 prefigured an end to modernist destruction and a heightened sensitivity to the historic forms of East Germany’s old cities.<sup>36</sup> At the official level, indeed, the GDR remained largely in lockstep with its West German neighbor in the evolution of its heritage discourses.

<sup>29</sup> In 2013, the Berlin architect Andreas Ruby stated: “Among urban planners and architects, hardly anyone wants a *Schloss*”; “Interview zum Berliner Stadtschloss. Das Ende des Kalten Krieges der Architektur,” *Berliner Zeitung*, November 10, 2013 (<https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/mensch-metropole/interview-zum-berliner-stadtschloss-das-ende-des-kalten-krieges-der-architektur-li.71901>).

<sup>30</sup> Rainer Haubrich, “In der Architektur muss Schönheit wieder höchste Priorität haben,” *Die Welt*, February 21, 2020 (<https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/plus206014799/Berliner-Schloss-In-der-Architektur-muss-Schoenheit-wieder-hoehste-Prioritaet-haben.html>).

<sup>31</sup> See “Schinkel und Kinkel,” *Der Spiegel*, December 17, 1995 (<https://www.spiegel.de/politik/schinkel-und-kinkel-a-75b83d35-0002-0001-0000-000009248728?context=issue>).

<sup>32</sup> Anna-Inés Hennes, *Das Berliner Schlossplatzdebatte im Spiegel der Presse* (Berlin: Braun, 2005), 75.

<sup>33</sup> Eberhard Fensch, *So und nur noch besser. Wie Honecker das Fernsehen wollte* (Berlin: Das Neue Berlin, 2003), 224.

<sup>34</sup> Fensch, *So und nur noch besser*.

<sup>35</sup> See Tino Mager, *Schillernde Unschärfe. Der Begriff der Authentizität im architektonischen Erbe* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 106–09.

<sup>36</sup> See Brian Ladd, “Socialist Planning and the Rediscovery of the Old City in the German Democratic Republic,” *Journal of Urban History* 2, no. 5 (2001): 584–603; Franziska Klemstein, *Denkmalpflege zwischen System und Gesellschaft. Vielfalt denkmalpflegerische Prozesse in der DDR (1952–1975)* (Berlin: Transcript, 2021), 206–09.

At a point in historical time when there was no shortage of voices lamenting the inability of modern architecture to supply the visual language demanded by such a significant symbolic space as Berlin's historic core, the *Schloss* idea had a powerful aesthetic appeal. With German reunification furnishing ample opportunities to reinfuse a sense of pomp and grandeur into representative urban spaces, and set amid a culture saturated with challenging debates about "coming to terms" with Germany's twentieth century, the pre-Weimar past seemed to offer a richer menu of usable visual idioms than the present. In contrast to the torrential cultural conflicts thrown up by the onerous legacies of Nazism and communism, the elegant forms of the northern Baroque offered a soothingly neutral aesthetic language. The reconstructed *Schloss* could, in the eyes of its proponents, serve as a bridge across the twentieth century, reconnecting the new Berlin Republic to a less taxing national heritage.<sup>37</sup> And in this sense, it was Prussia's *irrelevance* rather than its relevance that rendered possible the *Schloss*' unlikely resurrection: what Prussia did *not* represent mattered far more than what it did.

But the ostensibly neutral language of "urban form" nevertheless belied a rather different political impetus. If the restoration of architectural "harmony" to Berlin's historic center was conceived as a means by which to "heal" the aesthetic injuries inflicted upon it by war, dictatorship, and division, then it necessarily also called into question the value of the built residue of the fallen East German state. In an era marked by the blossoming phenomenon of *Ostalgie*, itself nourished by an escalating sense of East German resentment against the political, cultural, and—above all—economic dominance of imperious *Wessis*, architecture and built monuments frequently became flashpoints for emotionally charged discussions about the cultural identity of the reunified state. In this respect, 1989 was indeed a moment of fundamental rupture. The collapse of the GDR brought about a new historical sensibility that had the effect of musealizing that state's built environments overnight, transfiguring East German sites of power and everyday life alike into relics of a now closed-off and irretrievable past. Stripped of the political and social system that had conferred function and meaning upon these artifacts, the *Wende* recast them as sites of irrelevance or poignant repositories of collective memory, depending on one's perspective.<sup>38</sup> And, before long, the tension between these two positions would come to dominate some of Berlin's most charged urban conflicts.<sup>39</sup>

The fact that the *Wende* seemed to render obsolescent many of the GDR's material traces furnished modernism's critics with a tantalizing blank slate. Indeed, in making his case for the reconstruction of the *Schloss*, Siedler—West Berlin's most celebrated detractor of urban modernism—referred to what he termed "the barren surfaces" ("*die kahlen Flächen*") of post-1989 Berlin, evoking an image of the city's landscape in which "East German" spaces were essentially defined by incongruence and irrelevance.<sup>40</sup> The language of *Schloss* proponents often reflected less a concrete affirmation of a *particular* narrative of German history so much as a rush of triumphalism that rode the intoxicating democratic wave of 1989.<sup>41</sup> Particularly in the 1990s, proponents of reconstructing destroyed monuments made explicit

<sup>37</sup> See Ares Kalandides in Nikola Franco, "Dreaming of Prussia," *Exberliner*, June 9, 2010 (<https://www.exberliner.com/berlin/dreaming-of-prussia>).

<sup>38</sup> On *Ostalgie* and material memory, see Paul Betts, "The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture," *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 731–65; Jonathan Bach, *What Remains: Everyday Encounters with the Socialist Past in Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>39</sup> In the case of central Berlin, the fate of the *Palast der Republik* is the central aspect of the media discussions documented in Hennet, *Das Berliner Schlossplatzdebatte im Spiegel der Presse*.

<sup>40</sup> Siedler, "Das Schloss lag nicht in Berlin." On Siedler's criticisms of modernism in Berlin, see Siedler, Elisabeth Niggemeyer, und Gina Angress, *Die gemordete Stadt: Abgesang auf Putte und Straße, Platz und Baum* (West Berlin: Herbig, 1964). On the history of "the void" in Berlin, see Andreas Huyssen, "The Voids of Berlin," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (1997): 57–81.

<sup>41</sup> This may indeed be extended to many postsocialist urban initiatives in Berlin; see Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 53–54.



reference to instances of communist iconoclasm, presenting their restorations as vengeful crusades against the SED's callous acts of cultural desecration. Joachim Fest was emphatic about this mission, intoning that "if the destruction of the Palace [in 1950] was to be a symbol of communism's victory, reconstruction would be a symbol of its failure."<sup>42</sup> From this perspective, the reconstruction of the *Schloss* represented an attempt to "undo" the historical reality of the 1950 demolition, and thus to rewind two generations of Berlin's urban past.<sup>43</sup> As the conservative journalist Matthias Matussek put it, "Walter Ulbricht should not have the final say" over the shape of Berlin's historic core.<sup>44</sup> From the perspective of figures such as Fest, Siedler, and Matussek, 1989 represented a kind of second *Stunde Null*. "Healing" Berlin's urban landscape was, in fact, anything but a neutral statement.

The most obvious catch was that the full reconstruction of the *Schloss* still mandated the destruction of the *Palast der Republik*.<sup>45</sup> Following an initial decision by both the federal and Berlin governments to demolish this structure in March 1993 (ostensibly due to asbestos contamination), the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, the SED's successor) marshaled several thousand protesters to voice their resentment. This was followed by a petition campaign that attracted more than 50,000 signatures within four months.<sup>46</sup> For many opponents of the *Schloss* project, the decision to demolish the *Palast* on the basis of asbestos contamination reeked of hypocrisy, given the insistence of *Schloss* advocates that the SED's own public justification for the destruction of the Hohenzollern Palace—namely, that the degree of wartime damage it had suffered rendered it beyond salvation—was a mere front for the true, ideological motivation.<sup>47</sup> On the other side, those in favor of preserving the *Palast* produced a variety of arguments. Although some claimed for the building the status of "a place of meeting with the culture of the world," others emphasized its "significance as an acknowledgement of GDR history."<sup>48</sup> Others still stressed the *Palast's* historical value as a suggestive expression of modernist socialist design. Whatever the specifics of the arguments put forward, however, the proposal to demolish the *Palast* had the effect of charging the now-destitute and empty structure with new meaning. The discussion about the demolition of the *Palast* was propelled by the dynamics of memory politics in reunified Germany, at a time when the national process of "dealing with" the communist past was only beginning to countenance some measure of historical nuance. As a symbol of the GDR itself, the *Palast* was freighted with ambivalence: an emblem of dictatorship, to be sure, but also a monument to the unthreatening banalities of an everyday life that reunification had all but erased. In the end, as Martin Sabrow points out, the building's very ambiguity proved decisive in determining its fate. In a memory culture that gravitated irresistibly toward simplistic moral binaries, the contradictory symbolism of the *Palast*—in stark contrast to that of the universally despised *Mauer*—proved too difficult to characterize and control.<sup>49</sup> Much easier to blame the asbestos.

<sup>42</sup> Joachim Fest, "Plädoyer für den Wiederaufbau des Stadtschlusses," in *Das Neue Berlin: Baugeschichte und Stadtplanung der deutschen Hauptstadt*, ed. Michael Mörninger (Frankfurt/Main: Insel, 1991), 118.

<sup>43</sup> Julius Posener, "Das Schloss wieder aufzubauen?," in *Das Schloss?*, 108.

<sup>44</sup> Matthias Matussek, "Das Schloß als Symbol," *Der Spiegel*, July 12, 1998 (<https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/das-schloss-als-symbol-a-54b0d55a-0002-0001-0000-000007937888>).

<sup>45</sup> Jürgen Trimborn, "Palast der Republik oder preussisches Stadtschloss? Wie soll man mit Berlins Mitte umgehen? Die Diskussion um den Wiederaufbau des Hohenzollernschlusses," *Die alte Stadt* 25 (1998): 213. On the uses of the *Palast* in the interim, see Tim Birkholz, "Schloss mit der Debatte!?" *Die Zwischennutzungen im Palast der Republik im Kontext der Schlossplatzdebatte* (Berlin: Universitätsverlag der TU Berlin, 2008) ([http://schlossdebatte.de/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/grau\\_reihe-heft\\_14-birkholz\\_schloc39f\\_mit\\_d.pdf](http://schlossdebatte.de/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/grau_reihe-heft_14-birkholz_schloc39f_mit_d.pdf)).

<sup>46</sup> Hennet, *Das Berliner Schlossplatzdebatte im Spiegel der Presse*, 69–70.

<sup>47</sup> See for example the city planner Max Welch Guerra, quoted in Hennet, *Das Berliner Schlossplatzdebatte im Spiegel der Presse*, 70.

<sup>48</sup> The quotation is from the art historian Gabriele Dolff-Bonekämper; quoted in Hennet, *Das Berliner Schlossplatzdebatte im Spiegel der Presse*, 143.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Sabrow, "Der Palast der Republik als zeithistorischer Lerngegenstand," in *Palast der Republik: Ein Erinnerungsort neu diskutiert*, ed. Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss (Berlin: Technische Universität Berlin, 2017), 33–34.

The predominance of functional and aesthetic elements in the discourses surrounding the demolition of the *Palast der Republik* and the reconstruction of the *Schloss* revealed a pervasive sense of discomfort at tackling head on the historical legacy of the East German state. One evidently did not have to be an East German nostalgic to perceive the obliteration of the *Palast* as a gesture of disrespect to the historical memory of the GDR. But the argument that the rectangular bronze, steel, and concrete edifice was a jarring sight amid the elegant baroque and neoclassical forms of the historic city nevertheless proved persuasive for many Berliners. As the *Palast*-debate evolved throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, public support for retaining the visibly dilapidated structure remained sizeable, but never convincingly so: opinion polls conducted by the forsa institute indicated a perceptible withering of support for the structure's preservation over the course of the 1990s.<sup>50</sup> Since then, the temperature of these particular debates has dropped. But the ultimate erasure of the *Palast* in 2006–2008 allowed dissenting cultural energies to be refocused on the visual messages of the restored *Schloss* structure itself. If there was ever to be a moment in which Prussia would once again become the central referent in critical appraisals of the project, this was it. But, in the event, the nature and quality of the debate soon lurched in new directions.

## Presence

Following the demolition of the *Palast der Republik* in 2008, new fissures between the form and the content of the Humboldt Forum emerged. The year 2013 proved to be key in the evolution of these discussions. On June 12, as the foundation stone for the project was laid, one could detect a great confidence in the global thrust of the Humboldt Forum concept. Berlin's SPD mayor Klaus Wowereit wrote at the time:

Berlin and Germany need the Humboldt Forum. We need the idea of a dialogue of scholars and world cultures, a place which invites a broad public to examine the opportunities and risks of globalization. Realizing this project is important, because a commitment to cultural openness and the equality of the world's cultures corresponds to Germany's and Berlin's own cultural self-image.<sup>51</sup>

Hermann Parzinger, president of the *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, added that, by constructing the Humboldt Forum:

We can express the intellectual willingness of our country to align the geographical heart of the historic center of the German capital city with curiosity, dialogue and cosmopolitanism instead of self-involvement. And yet this place will also contribute to a sense of reassurance about ourselves in an increasingly globalized world.<sup>52</sup>

If the crux of the debates during the 1990s and early 2000s had centered on very German-centric (indeed, sometimes Berlin-centric) concerns, Parzinger's statement suggested that the concept of the "Humboldt Forum" could permit a flight from the parochial into the universal: after so many years of arduous navel gazing, Germany was, finally, looking outward.

The shift of focus toward the "global" meant leaving behind the difficult discussions associated with demolishing the *Palast der Republik*. But it also permitted the Prussian past to be repurposed for a new, positive message. The social democrat Manfred Stolpe, Federal

<sup>50</sup> Hennett, *Das Berliner Schlossplatzdebatte im Spiegel der Presse*, 141.

<sup>51</sup> Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, ed., *The Humboldt Forum in the Berliner Schloss: Planning, Processes, Perspectives* (Munich: Hirmer, 2013), 9.

<sup>52</sup> Hermann Parzinger, "The Humboldt-Forum in the Berliner Schloss: Expectations and Opportunities," in Kulturbesitz, *The Humboldt Forum in the Berliner Schloss*, 12.

Minister of Transport, Building and Urban Affairs between 2002 and 2005, took the opportunity to summon the “good Prussia” as a historical foundation for reaffirming Germany’s status as an upright European and global citizen: “If a national cultural and scientific forum is opened in this place where the Prussian Castle once stood, then Prussia could finally merge into Germany and Europe.”<sup>53</sup> And it was precisely this line of thinking that enabled the name “Humboldt” to emerge as the missing link between the Prussian exterior and the “global” interior. The decision to adopt the Humboldt brothers as the project’s historical patrons is scarcely thinkable without the historical-political background of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>54</sup> One of the outcomes of the pan-German reckoning with the Prussian past that took place in these years was the popular resurrection of the old notion that the history of the Prussian state was characterized by a “Janus face”—on the one hand, militarism and aggression, and on the other, enlightenment, toleration, and cultural accomplishment. By the late 1980s, Christopher Clark remarks, “It seemed impossible to write anything at all about Prussia without pouring a libation to Janus.”<sup>55</sup> And the name “Humboldt,” of course, could readily be associated with Prussia’s “positive face.” By invoking the humanist legacy of the Humboldt brothers, Parzinger argued, “We draw on our tradition as a scientific and cultural nation, with recourse to the best of Prussia, and develop this into a new vision for the future.”<sup>56</sup> By means of its enlightened and humanist heritage, Prussia could supply the very prototype for a global Germany.

One can perhaps understand the optimism about the global impulse of the project at this point in time. After all, the bitter debate about the purported Christian symbolism of the structure’s crowning crucifix and cupola (see next paragraph) was yet to emerge, and, more critically, there was still next to no public talk about *Raubkunst* or Germany’s colonial legacy, whether in official publications or in the critical press. Nonetheless, some cracks were beginning to appear. Among sceptics, the effusion displayed by the forum’s backers for the new concept reanimated the feeling that the reconstruction of the *Schloss* was nothing more than a nostalgic conservative fantasy smuggled in behind a smokescreen of benign cosmopolitanism.<sup>57</sup> As Stephan Speicher put it in the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* the day after the foundation stone was laid, “The decision to house the non-European collections of the Prussian Culture Foundation here was an attempt to add an antidote to a possibly still latently poisonous past.”<sup>58</sup> Worryingly for the project’s champions, a forsa survey from March 2013 found that 61 percent of Berliners no longer wanted their *Schloss*.<sup>59</sup> And even more ominously, that same year witnessed the formation of the “No Humboldt 21” group: one of the first to publicly protest the Eurocentrism of the project from a postcolonial perspective.<sup>60</sup>

Four years later, a new—and rather unexpected—debate about the Humboldt Forum erupted in the Berlin press. This time, it concerned the erection of a four-meter-high gilded Christian cross atop the palace’s cupola (fig. 2).<sup>61</sup> The placement of the cross was not,

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Friedrich von Bose, *Das Humboldt Forum. Eine Ethnografie seiner Planung* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2016), 73.

<sup>54</sup> See Jonathan Bach, “Brand of Brothers? The Humboldt Forum and the Myths of Innocence,” *German Politics and Society* 39, no. 1 (2021): 100–11.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (London: Penguin, 2006), 283.

<sup>56</sup> Parzinger, “The Humboldt-Forum in the Berliner Schloss: Expectations and Opportunities,” in Kulturbesitz, *The Humboldt Forum in the Berliner Schloss*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> See Penny, *In Humboldt’s Shadow*, 190–91. The art historian Bénédicte Savoy, who in 2017 resigned from the Forum’s advisory board in protest over the museums’ lack of providence research into its colonial collections, described the “Humboldt Forum” concept as a mere “label”: see “Expertin: Humboldt-Forum verschweigt Ursprung seiner Sammlungen,” *monopol. Magazin für Kunst und Leben*, July 21, 2017 (<https://www.monopol-magazin.de/expertin-humboldt-forum-verschweigt-ursprung-seiner-sammlungen>).

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Dominika Gortych, Guido Hinterkeuser, and Łukasz Skoczylas, *Erinnerungsimplante—Der (Wieder)Aufbau der Schlösser in Posen und Berlin im interdisziplinären Vergleich* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2017), 111.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Gortych, Hinterkeuser, and Skoczylas, *Erinnerungsimplante*, 108.

<sup>60</sup> “No Humboldt21: Moratorium für das Humboldt-Forum im Berliner Schloss” (<https://www.no-humboldt21.de>).

<sup>61</sup> Duane Jethro, “Cross and Cupola: Religious Matters at the Berlin Stadtschloss,” *Religious Matters Blog*, June 15, 2020 (<https://religiousmatters.nl/cross-and-cupola-religious-matters-at-the-berlin-stadtschloss/>). The debate is

technically speaking, a surprise: it had been included in some (though not all) of the architect Franco Stella's original renderings for the forum back in 2008, and the announcement that the requisite private funding for its restoration had been obtained had already been made in 2015.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, the pronouncement in May 2017 that the cross would be raised seventy meters above the Berlin skyline triggered a renewed discussion about the Prussian legacy, this time centered on the purported relationship between the reconstructed *Schloss* and the old Prussian state church confluence of "pulpit and bayonet."<sup>63</sup> The cross, grumbled the architectural critic Nikolaus Bernau, had initially been erected to demonstrate "the tight, profoundly anti-reformist coalition of the state church and the Hohenzollern dynasty under Friedrich Wilhelm IV."<sup>64</sup> Equally frustrating for critics was the revelation that the *Schloss*' cupola would be adorned by an unsettling inscription initially composed by Friedrich Wilhelm in the 1840s: "There is no other salvation, there is no other name given to men, but the name of Jesus, in honor of the Father, that in the name of Jesus all those in heaven and on earth and under the earth should bow down on their knees."<sup>65</sup> The journalist Maria Ossowski argued that this inscription was completely indicative of the essence of "Prussian State-Christianity, which demands subordination and obedience."<sup>66</sup> It was also hardly in keeping with the species of humanist toleration that allegedly typified the "good Prussia." An inscription proclaiming "that only 'bending your knees' before Jesus Christ gives people 'salvation,'" wrote Bernau in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, was "unmistakably directed against the equality of Jews or indeed agnostics."<sup>67</sup> In May 2020, as the cross was finally being hoisted atop the structure, the Berlin historian and rabbi Andreas Nachama, writing in the *Jüdische Allgemeine*, posed the rhetorical question of whether Germany's capital city was "actually a 'multicolored spectrum' (*bunte Palette*)" and a "city of tolerance, in which Christians, Jews, Muslims, the non-religious and the anti-religious can peacefully live side by side?" "No," he responded: "Berlin is a city which apparently continues to live with the idea that cross and Christianity alone can bring happiness.... in the year 2020 there should be no such relapse into the mental world of a Prussian king."<sup>68</sup> True to form, those most eager to restore the cross and inscription couched their arguments in terms of urban aesthetics and "authenticity." "It would be a form of iconoclasm of its own to

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helpfully summarized by Laura Goldenbaum in "Die Sache mit dem Kreuz," *Humboldt Forum Magazin*, May 25, 2020 (<https://www.humboldtforum.org/de/magazin/artikel/die-sache-mit-dem-kreuz/?dossier=1>).

<sup>62</sup> The Expert Commission that reported to the *Bundestag* in 2002 recommended only the reconstruction of western, southern, and northern baroque facades, leaving the question of the cupola (and cross) to the subsequent design competition.

<sup>63</sup> A collection of media responses in May–August 2017 are reproduced "Pressestimmen 2017," *Humboldt Forum Magazin*, May 25, 2020 (<https://www.humboldtforum.org/de/magazin/artikel/pressestimmen-2017/?dossier=1>). The quotation is from Andreas Kilb.

<sup>64</sup> Nikolaus Bernau, "Ein Schloss ist kein Schloss ist kein Schloss," *Cicero*, December 17, 2020 (<https://www.cicero.de/kultur/humboldt-forum-eroeffnung-berliner-schloss>). Moreover, the fact that the cross had been installed as late as 1854 as part of a crusade by Friedrich Wilhelm to express his authority in the wake of the 1848 revolution was also lost on many critics; Gesine Palmer, "Ein Kreuz in den Farben der Macht," *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, June 17, 2020 ([https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/humboldt-forum-berlin-ein-kreuz-in-den-farben-der-macht.1005.de.html?dram:article\\_id=478725](https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/humboldt-forum-berlin-ein-kreuz-in-den-farben-der-macht.1005.de.html?dram:article_id=478725)). An alternative view is put forward by Peter Stephan, "Seinerzeit ein Zeichen der Demut," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 12, 2020 (<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/unterm-kreuz-peter-stephan-zur-kuppel-auf-dem-humboldt-forum-16810720.html>).

<sup>65</sup> The inscription refers to Acts 4:12 and the epistle to the Philippians 2:10.

<sup>66</sup> Maria Ossowski, "Streit um Kreuz auf Berliner Stadtschloss: 'Das ist preußisches Staatschristentum,'" *rbb24*, May 31, 2020 (<https://www.rbb24.de/kultur/beitrag/2020/05/berlin-stadtschloss-humboldtforum-kuppel-kreuz.html>).

<sup>67</sup> Nikolaus Bernau, "Ein Kreuz für das Berliner Stadtschloss. Auf die Knie gezwungen," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, May 26, 2020 (<https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/kreuz-berliner-stadtschloss-knie-gezwungen-13776996.html>). Elsewhere, Bernau wrote that "It is the first clearly anti-Jewish inscription that has been allowed to be re-attached to a new public building in Germany since 1945—under the pretext that it is about a 'reconstruction'"; Bernau, "Ein Schloss ist kein Schloss ist kein Schloss."

<sup>68</sup> Andreas Nachama, "Wie das neue Humboldt-Forum zu einem Symbol Berliner Intoleranz wird," *Jüdische Allgemeine*, May 28, 2020 (<https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/allgemein/mit-dem-kreuz-gegen-religioese-vielfalt>).



**Figure 2.** The cross and inscription above the western portal. Photo by author, summer 2020.

omit the cross,” argued Horst Bredekamp, one of the three founding directors of the Humboldt Forum: “Reconstructions, when they are decided upon, must free themselves from the *Zeitgeist* and [current] sentiments.”<sup>69</sup> Wilhelm von Boddien put it even more bluntly: “The reconstruction of a lost building has to orient itself around the last view of the building. If you leave something out, one can easily view this as censorship against unpleasant attributes ... Here the maxim applies: ‘Pregnant or not pregnant; you can’t be a bit pregnant.’”<sup>70</sup> From the perspective of Bredekamp and Boddien, symbolism was seemingly not an aspect of the *Schloss* construction to be negotiated: it was simply not a factor at all.

Even more uncomfortably for the *Schloss*’ supporters, in late 2021 renewed attention was drawn to the worryingly frequent affinity between backing for their project and the far-right extremes. The architectural historian Philipp Oswald highlighted the fact that one of the Forum’s major donors, Ehrhardt Bödecker, whose donation of half a million Euro had been acknowledged with a relief medallion at the structure’s western gate,<sup>71</sup> had been identified by the Central Council of Jews in Germany as a repeated purveyor of antisemitic statements, extending to disputing the true number of Holocaust victims.<sup>72</sup> And Bödecker, it turned out, was “not an isolated case.” Further research revealed that donors honored in the forum included the editor of the right-wing newspaper *Junge Freiheit*, Dieter Stein, several “profiteers of the Nazi regime and their heirs,” as well as a number of individuals

<sup>69</sup> “Humboldt-Intendant Bredekamp. “Geschichte ist keine planierte Straße,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, June 3, 2017 (<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/streit-um-kreuz-auf-berliner-stadtschloss-humboldt-intendant-bredekamp-geschichte-ist-keine-planierte-strasse/19890830.html>).

<sup>70</sup> “Das Kreuz. Ein Zeichen der Versöhnung,” *Förderverein Berliner Schloss*, May 25, 2020 (<https://berliner-schloss.de/blog/das-kreuz-ein-zeichen-der-versoehnung>).

<sup>71</sup> The figure is from Marcus Woeller, “Das Berliner Schloss und seine rechten Spender,” *Die Welt*, December 19, 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Philipp Oswald, “Preußentum und Antisemitismus. Ehrt das Humboldt Forum einen Mäzen mit rechtsradikaler Gesinnung?,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 27, 2021 (<https://plus.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/preussentum-und-antisemitismus-ehrt-das-humboldt-forum-einen-mazen-mit-rechtsradikaler-gesinnung-285568.html>). The plaque honoring Bödecker was removed soon after; “Humboldt Forum entfernt Tafel für Antidemokraten,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, November 4, 2021 (<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/nach-kritik-an-grossspender-boedecker-humboldt-forum-entfernt-tafel-fuer-antidemokraten/27770424.html>).

connected with “anti-democratic and right-wing milieus.”<sup>73</sup> Surveying the fallout of these revelations in the Austrian daily *Der Standard*, Stephan Trüby—co-leader of the critical *Rechte Räume* project—argued that these kinds of:

Right-wing donors do not simply want to undertake harmless journeys through time; rather, they have come with complete determination to build the stage sets for [a] political rollback ... To put it bluntly: the most important German cultural project since reunification is in the hands of a misalliance of reactionaries and the disorganized (*Planlosen*).<sup>74</sup>

To be sure, it is far from the case that support for the *Schloss* initiative came exclusively from the right. Even before the “Humboldt Forum” concept was developed, enthusiasts for the reconstruction could be located across the political spectrum. But it is nevertheless notable that the language of right-wing Prussia champions has tended to emphasize the structure’s status as a *Schloss*, not as the “Humboldt Forum.” In 2007, Dieter Stein expressed the view that “The *Schloss* is the heart of Prussian Germany.”<sup>75</sup> And, in a speech on German memory culture that soon gained international notoriety, Björn Höcke, the firebrand extreme right leader of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party’s Thuringian branch, fulsomely praised the *Schloss* reconstruction for its potential to generate the “spirit of a new, honest, vital, deeply-rooted and self-conscious patriotism.”<sup>76</sup> Though positioned on the outermost extremes of the far right, Höcke nevertheless gives voice to a certain strain of Prussia admiration evident within the AfD. His Brandenburg colleague Andreas Kalbitz conducted the party’s 2019 *Landestag* election campaign on a platform explicitly extolling Prussia as a model “for successfully shaping our collective future.”<sup>77</sup> The AfD has also been the most vocal political defender of the Hohenzollern family’s recent restitution claims. In a 2020 video titled “Justice for Prussia” (“*Gerechtigkeit für Preußen*”), Marc Jongen, an AfD representative in the *Bundestag*, argued that “Underlying the dispute over the possible return of former possessions of the House of Hohenzollern is a deep-seated resentment against Prussia.”<sup>78</sup> Certainly from the perspective of the far right, Prussia remains a powerful weapon to be deployed in the “culture wars” of the twenty-first century.

## Conclusions

This discussion began with the question of why Prussia was, in effect, the dog that didn’t bark after 1990. Yet at the same time, it has sought to show that the pale specter of Prussia could nevertheless be detected at the sidelines of the many controversies that enveloped the reconstruction of the Berlin Royal Palace. Supporters of the project were keen to avoid difficult questions about the Prussian legacy, while those who summoned it as a dark warning tale from history were increasingly forced to contend with the fact that “a disenchantment of the Prussian ideas of power and an enlightened appreciation of the Hohenzollern House” had steadily taken place precisely during those “years in which the

<sup>73</sup> “Neue Recherchen zeigen. Weitere rechtslastige Spender für das Berliner Schlossprojekt,” December 10, 2021 (<https://www.uni-kassel.de/fb06/institute/architektur/startseite/meldung/2021/12/10/neue-recherchen-zeigen-weitere-rechtslastige-spender-fuer-das-berliner-schlossprojekt?cHash=be4d907da360efd93fe3bffe93f68d63>).

<sup>74</sup> Stephan Trüby, “Das Humboldt Forum in den Händen von Reaktionären und Planlosen,” *Der Standard*, January 16, 2022 (<https://www.derstandard.de/story/2000132536424/das-humboldt-forum-in-den-haenden-von-reaktionaeren-und-planlosen>).

<sup>75</sup> “Neue Recherchen zeigen.”

<sup>76</sup> “‘Gemütszustand eines total besiegten Volkes.’ Höcke-Rede im Wortlaut,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, January 19, 2017 (<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/hoecke-rede-im-wortlaut-gemuetszustand-eines-total-besiegten-volkes/19273518-all.html>).

<sup>77</sup> “Wahlprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl des Landtages Brandenburg am 01. September 2019” (<https://afd-brandenburg.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Leitantrag-Landtagswahlprogramm-AfD-BB-2019.pdf>). Kalbitz was kicked out of the party in 2020.

<sup>78</sup> “Dr. Marc Jongen: Gerechtigkeit für Preußen!—AfD-Fraktion im Bundestag,” *Alternative für Deutschland*, January 29, 2020 (<https://afdbundestag.de/dr-marc-jongen-gerechtigkeit-fuer-preussen-afd-fraktion-im-bundestag/>).

*Schloss* idea matured.”<sup>79</sup> During the critical years of the 1990s, it was accordingly the former in the ascendancy. Following the eruption of historical passions surrounding the “Prussia Wave” in both Germanys during the late 1970s and early 1980s, it seemed, the history of the Prussian state had quickly migrated from the political pulpit to the impassive province of illustrated coffee-table books, art galleries, and hobby historians. The Prussia that emerged from this unexpected pan-German cultural reckoning was clad in a sanitized, aesthetic form: the Prussia of Schinkel and Menzel rather than that of merciless junkers and soldier kings. Germans had apparently come a long way from the old idea that Nazism was but a racist mutation of “Prussianism.” Indeed, much of this apparent sea change in historical perception surely bore some relationship to the seismic shifts in how the Third Reich came to be understood as a historical phenomenon at much the same time: with the public focus of the Nazi legacy centering ever more on the crimes of the Holocaust, the notion that Nazism was but the last incarnation of Prussian warmongering came to seem quaintly archaic and historically unsatisfying. As a consequence, by the late 1980s, Prussia’s explosive political and cultural power had seemingly been all but defused. The upshot was a propitious cultural environment for the *Schloss* initiative to gain a purchase on the public imagination.

And yet, despite the dexterity of the *Schloss*’ champions in exploiting the dynamic and uncertain post-unification cultural moment to mobilize public support for their mission, they never succeeded entirely in neutralizing “Prussia” as a source of controversy. Throughout the tortuous discussions about the reconstruction of the Berlin Royal Palace, Prussia remained present—even if its presence was in many cases latent rather than explicit. Whether this concerned the structure’s visual symbolism, the “enlightened” concept of the Humboldt Forum, or the defiant *Preußtalgie* of its right-wing supporters, the Prussian legacy was, in fact, rarely far from the surface. Of course, in neither content nor intensity can these debates be compared with those that raged in the wake of the Second World War. But they nonetheless touched upon some essential features of Germany’s changing self-image in the years following reunification. And if, to follow Katharina Grabbe, “the dispute over the *Schloss* can ... be understood as a dispute about the fundamental values of the nation, the identity of the nation,”<sup>80</sup> then the shadowy presence of Prussia in this “dispute” suggests that its cultural power in Germany today has not entirely been exhausted.

To be sure, Prussia is not what it used to be. Particularly outside of Germany, the name “Prussia” hardly conjures the trembling visions of goose-stepping warriors that so haunted generations past. Such is the waning force of Prussia as a historical entity in the public imagination that discussions have even flared in the past couple of years about removing the word *Prussia* from the name of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (*Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*). As the head of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences Martin Grötschel told the Berlin daily *BZ*, “Unfortunately, Prussia has become a term with which normal foreign tourists can no longer relate.”<sup>81</sup> Hermann Parzinger, the president of the foundation, added: “The name Prussia does not make it easy in terms of marketing.”<sup>82</sup> And the fact that the most recent disputes about the symbolism and meaning of the Humboldt Forum have had a perceptibly *international* charge—concerning as they do Germany’s place in the twenty-first-century world—has in some respects only pushed Prussia ever further to the margins.

But perhaps it is still too easy to write off Prussia as a closed case entirely. As is evident to any visitor to Potsdam today, the irrepressible cult of Frederick the Great amply suggests

<sup>79</sup> Harry Nutt, “Im Rohbau der Ideen,” *Berliner Zeitung*, June 10, 2015 (<https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/leitartikel-zum-berliner-stadtschloss-im-rohbau-der-ideen-li.17413>).

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Gortych, Hinterkeuser, and Skoczylas, *Erinnerungsimplante*, 55. See also Merlijn Schoonenboom, *Ein Palast für die Republik. Eine kleine Geschichte der großen deutschen Suche nach Identität*, trans. Birgit Erdmann (Berlin: argobooks, 2020).

<sup>81</sup> “Debatte um den Namen! Ist Preußen wirklich total out?,” *BZ*, July 18, 2020 (<https://www.bz-berlin.de/berlin/debatte-um-den-namen-ist-preussen-wirklich-total-out>).

<sup>82</sup> “Debatte um den Namen! Ist Preußen wirklich total out?.”

that the cultural—if not the political—allure of the old hegemon is undimmed. And for all the sparkling attractions of its distant dynastic past, Prussia’s “dark side” continues to rear its head. The Hohenzollern family’s recent legal claims for the restitution of some of their confiscated properties are a clear case in point.<sup>83</sup> Of course, the “Hohenzollern Affair” hardly signals a substantial public reckoning with the Prussian past: through their actions, the Hohenzollern family has attracted much ignominy and little support. But, nevertheless, the narrow legal problem of whether Crown Prince Wilhelm had “substantially aided” the Nazis in their rise to power ultimately pivots on an age-old historiographical question about the Prussian imprint on the character of National Socialism. And for this reason, at least, one ought to think twice about simply bracketing off this unlikely set of events as the clownish antics of an obsolete royal house. The Prussian legacy has also played a critical role in the animated discussions surrounding recent publications by Hedwig Richter and Dirk Moses, which have drawn attention to the lasting strains of the *Kaiserreich* in post-1918 Germany.<sup>84</sup> Around the edges of these discussions are some distinct resonances of the old scholarly debates about the origins and extent of Germany’s “Prussification” after 1871.<sup>85</sup> The centrality of the *Kaiserreich* to these discussions—as well, of course, to the escalating discussions about German colonialism—goes some way in explaining the relative absence of “Prussia” as a referent. But it also means that the Prussian past remains, in a number of vitally important respects, a live subject.

Back in the early 1990s, Prussia’s “dark legend” seemed to many to have faded forever.<sup>86</sup> But Prussia’s enormous influence over the course of German and European history nevertheless ensured that its legacy continued to resurface, in new ways, as a source of bitter controversy. As the debates surrounding the Humboldt Forum have revealed time and again, even those championing the sunlit uplands of a globally engaged, reunified Germany could not, in the end, outrun Prussia’s long shadow.

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<sup>83</sup> Frank-Lothar Kroll, Christian Hillgruber, Michael Wolffsohn, ed., *Die Hohenzollerndebatte. Beiträge zu einem geschichtspolitischen Streit* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2021); Hans von Trotha, *Die große Illusion. Ein Schloss, eine Fassade und ein Traum von Preußen* (Berlin: Berenberg, 2021), 9–15; Stefan Malinowski, *Nazis & Nobles: The History of a Misalliance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 329–42; David Motadel, “What do the Hohenzollerns Deserve?,” *New York Review of Books*, March 26, 2020 (<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/03/26/what-do-the-hohenzollerns-deserve/>); Richard J. Evans, “The German History Wars,” *New Statesman*, May 12, 2021 (<https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2021/05/german-history-wars>).

<sup>84</sup> Hedwig Richter, *Demokratie. Eine deutsche Affäre* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2020); Dirk Moses, “Der Katechismus der Deutschen,” *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, May 23, 2021 (<https://geschichtedergewegenwart.ch/der-katechismus-der-deutschen>).

<sup>85</sup> Aspects of this debate can, for instance, be detected in Oliver F. R. Haardt, *Bismarcks ewiger Bund. Eine neue Geschichte des Deutschen Kaiserreichs* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2020).

<sup>86</sup> The phrase is from Gregor Thum, *Uprooted: How Breslau Became Wrocław during the Century of Expulsions*, trans. Tom Lampert and Allison Brown (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 377.

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