



Dieter Hoffmann. *Einstein's Berlin: In the Footsteps of a Genius.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. xiii + 175 pp. \$45.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-4214-1040-1.



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Before it became the doomed “Germania” of the Third Reich and the epicenter of the global Cold War, Berlin was the hub of the Second Industrial Revolution, an “electropolis” brimming with energy, activity, and anxiety.[1] The city’s brash exuberance even survived the dual shock of defeat and revolution in 1918, manifesting itself in the hedonistic decadence and cultural riches of the Weimar era.[2] As the unofficial capital of the twentieth century, Berlin has attracted both scholars and tourists for decades. As far as the latter is concerned, the specters of the Third Reich and the Cold War still haunt the cityscape, diverting the tourist gaze from a different sort of metropolis.

Dieter Hoffmann’s historical guidebook, *Einstein’s Berlin: In the Footsteps of a Genius*, promises exactly that: access to a different sort of Berlin, one defined by bourgeois parlors, modern research facilities, banquet halls, and rostrums. This was the Berlin of the German-Jewish scientist Albert Einstein, who lived and worked in the German capital from the spring of 1914 until the winter of 1932. As a full-time scholar in residence at

the Prussian Academy of Sciences, Einstein enjoyed consistent financial and institutional support in Berlin. In fact, this Berlin episode proved to be one of the most productive periods of his life, peaking early with the completion of his general theory of relativity in 1915. At the same time, Einstein found himself the target of increasingly vehement attacks, as opponents criticized his “unintuitive” and “complicated” theories and his “Bolshevist” and “Jewish” politics (pp. 41, 109). His stay in the German capital ended in December 1932, when Einstein and his second wife departed for a research tour to the United States. After Adolf Hitler’s appointment as German chancellor in early 1933, Einstein renounced his German citizenship and never returned to Berlin.

Hoffmann’s short volume, a translation of his 2006 German title, provides insight into the professional, political, and personal life of Einstein, as well as a glimpse into the vibrant academic culture of pre-Nazi Berlin. After a brief foreword by scientist Walter Kohn and an introduction by Hoffmann, a research scholar at the Max Planck

Institute for the History of Science, the volume moves from site to site, offering details on a number of Berlin locations that figured prominently in Einstein's life. Each entry begins with a modern-day address, along with directions for reaching the site with public transportation. However, Hoffmann makes it clear that his work is more than a historical guidebook. In spite of a rather restrictive format, he proposes an analytical argument about interpersonal connections within the "Berlin network," insisting that Einstein's "life and work were linked with the scientific and social life of the city" (pp. xii-xiii). In the end, this thesis remains suggestive, as the guidebook format carries the reader from site to site with little space for analytical elaboration.

This unique tour of the German metropolis is divided into four chapters: "The Berlin Apartments," "Einstein's Workplaces in Berlin," "*Homo Politicus*," and "A Circle of Friends and Acquaintances." Chapter 1 covers Einstein's residences in and around the German capital. Descriptions of his first two apartments establish that his early years in Berlin were marked not only by intellectual breakthroughs but also by quarrels with his first wife, separation from his family, and wartime deprivation and illness. In 1917, Einstein moved into a larger apartment in Schöneberg, which he subsequently shared with his cousin and second wife, Elsa, until 1932. Throughout this period, the couple hosted countless gatherings at their apartment, with guests ranging from Walther Rathenau to Charlie Chaplin.

Chapter 2 covers nine "workplaces," from the Prussian Academy of Sciences to the famous "Einstein Tower" in Potsdam. Collectively, these entries give us a greater appreciation of the professional obligations of the celebrity scientist. Especially noteworthy is the section on the AEG Research Laboratory, where Einstein collaborated with Leó Szilárd on the development of the so-called people's fridge, a refrigeration unit that relied on the principle of evaporation. In addition to

the significance of interpersonal relationships, another theme that emerges in this chapter is the growing hostility toward Einstein's research and public persona.

This hostility ultimately contributed to the political maturation of Einstein, a topic covered in chapter 3. Einstein may have been relatively apolitical upon his arrival in Berlin in 1914, but within years he was making opinionated speeches and playing an active role in the German League of Human Rights and the Society of Friends of the New Russia. Hoffmann asserts that it was the violent collapse of the Kaiserreich and the precarious existence of the Weimar Republic that compelled Einstein to voice his support for international peace and political and social reform. At the same time, a resurgent anti-Semitism in the German capital motivated Einstein to rediscover his Jewish roots and embrace a cultural and historical identity that made him part of the broader religious community and Zionist movement.

Concentrating on this theme of interpersonal relationships, chapter 4 focuses on seven locations associated with important people in Einstein's life. While moving from address to address, Hoffmann discusses Einstein's friendships with men like Max Planck and Emanuel Lasker, revealing some of the more everyday interests and proclivities of the famous genius. Even more interesting is the brief section on Einstein's marital infidelity in Berlin, and in particular, his affair with the respected widow Toni Mendel. Further information on this subject would have yielded a more complex picture of Einstein, but it would have likely compromised the generally laudatory tone of the work.

In sum, this is an engaging book that provides a concise tour of a lesser-known Berlin sprinkled with facts about one of the greatest scientific minds of the last century. It utilizes a variety of primary sources, including archival texts and extended quotations from Einstein. It also features a wealth of images that allow the reader to visual-

ize the architecture, interiors, and personalities of Einstein's Berlin. Furthermore, it is well translated and clearly written.

Nevertheless, there are a number of issues. First, the author's commitment to the historical guidebook format leads to some redundancy, as Hoffmann repeats elements of biographical information at several locations. Second, the volume does not contain a map of Einstein's Berlin, making it rather difficult to visualize spatial connections, and actually follow the "footsteps" of the genius. Third, the author pays little attention to the modern-day condition of many of these sites, and does not adequately address their accessibility as contemporary tourist attractions. In other words, aside from the addresses and directions, this historical guidebook does little to facilitate actual tourism.

To be fair, Hoffmann states clearly at the outset that *Einstein's Berlin* is more than a historical guidebook. At the conclusion, it is likewise clear that the work is less than a historical monograph, and not just because of its length. Yes, Hoffmann stresses the importance of the "Berlin network" in the introduction, and he demonstrates the significance of interpersonal relationships throughout Einstein's tenure in the German capital. Still, the reader does not develop a clear idea of what this Berlin network was, or how it functioned beyond Einstein's areas of involvement. In my mind, the more significant argument concerns Einstein's political maturation in response to the overt nationalism, militarism, and anti-Semitism of the German capital. This development was related to the network of scientists, doctors, and intellectuals surrounding Einstein, but these connections are not thoroughly discussed in this otherwise entertaining volume.

Notes

[1]. Andreas Killen, *Berlin Electropolis: Shock, Nerves, and German Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 20-25.

[2]. David Clay Large, *Berlin* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 210-232.

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