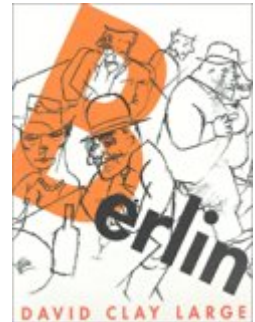


**David Clay Large.** *Berlin*. New York: Basic Books, 2000. X + 706 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-02646-3.



**Reviewed by** Dorothee Brantz

**Published on** H-Urban (February, 2001)

David Clay Large's latest book *Berlin* appeared just as the twentieth century drew to a close. If we look back at the past one hundred years, we see a century dominated not only by war (both hot and cold), political turmoil, but also by great ingenuity, cultural diversity and experimentation. When one thinks about the chronology of the twentieth century, one inevitably is led to Berlin. Large posits, "If Paris was the 'Capital of the Nineteenth Century', Berlin became the signature city of the next hundred years" (xviii). As such, Berlin, perhaps more than other cities, warrants reflection and a critical analysis of its past. This is exactly what Large offers his readers.

Spanning the period from 1871 to 1999, Large's account focuses on high politics and culture, as well as on Berlin's physical landscape and street life. He essentially argues that the city was in a constant process of remaking its identity, be it as imperial capital, struggling republic, Nazi headquarters, divided icon of the Cold War, or as the once again capital of a reunified Germany. Each of the chronologically arranged chapters takes up a crucial segment of this development, starting with

the boom and bust of the 1870s and ending with the excitement and disillusion of the 1990s. Drawing on a broad range of newspapers, historical accounts, and literary texts, Large offers a vibrant kaleidoscope of the architectural monuments, cultural highlights, political figures as well as popular attitudes and the dissemination of ideologies—most notably, anti-Semitism, national socialism, and Soviet-style communism. Presenting narrative history at its best, Large explores life in the city itself, and he also discusses Berlin's position among a growing network of German and European cities. Describing its lively and audacious, often troubled, and repeatedly violent biography, Large exposes many sides and sights of Berlin. But he does not pass judgment, rather he allows readers to draw their own conclusions about this city and its people.

Stylistically, his approach oscillates between a marveling embrace of and critical reserve towards the people and events that have driven the development of Berlin since the 1870s. This approach not only mirrors, but also helps to illuminate, both the exhilaration and dismay that Berlin

has always roused in its inhabitants and observers. Large explores how Berlin, which emerged as a Prussian "bullying behemoth" (5), was soon drawn into an ongoing struggle for its hegemony as the German capital and its legitimacy as European metropolis, a struggle that continues even today. Large convincingly argues that Berlin's ambitions to become a world city like London and Paris were underwritten by a lingering "inferiority complex," which, on the one hand, made the city vulnerable for totalitarian exploits, while, on the other, provided a fertile ground for cultural experimentation, revolutionary agitation, and a diversity of life styles. Large skillfully weaves together these overarching themes while also paying close attention to details. For example he describes the decadent night life of the 1920s or the camouflaging of the streets to impede aerial bombings during World War II. Large's *Berlin* is not a textbook history, but rather a dazzling ride through the city's streets, parks, dance halls, governmental offices, into the Mietskasernen (housing barracks) and Grunewald villas, through the neighborhoods and over the Wall.

According to the author, "this book is a narrative history of the city of Berlin framed by the two German unifications" (xviii). Large's chronicle is a successful attempt at synthesis. Precisely at this moment when we are looking back at the tumultuous century we just left behind, it might also be a good time to reconsider the potential of grand narratives. Historians frequently criticize this type of historical analysis for presenting artificially constructed, often teleological, meta-narratives that ignore the diversity of experiences, everyday practices, and especially the lives of ordinary people. Large demonstrates that this does not have to be the case. Large's approach exemplifies what Peter Burke has called "the thickening of narratives." This is especially remarkable because Large does not just focus on a particular historical moment, but rather explores more than a century. This is an ambitious endeavor, and it raises the pressing question of how to manage the sheer

mass of materials. Admittedly, I was at first a bit intimidated by the 650 page volume. I quickly discovered, however, this book is a captivating read; just like a good novel, it is hard to put down. He elaborates on the diversity of experiences by introducing a wide array of political, cultural, and social institutions and a broad spectrum of voices ranging from Bismarck to the artist Käthe Kollwitz and to Inge Deutschkorn, a young Jewish woman who tried to save herself from the Nazis. Surely, Large had to make compromises for reasons of manageability. While there are frequent references to everyday life, Large tends to fall back on a more conventional 'central figures/leading institutions' approach. More social history would have been helpful to create a better sense of how people lived, what they ate, where they worked, how they loved and died.

Large, who is a scholar of the Weimar and Nazi period, is at his best when describing the 1920s and 1930s. In comparison, the postwar chapters are not as encompassing because they center mainly on politics. Unfortunately, the reader does not gain many insights into what life was like on either side of the Wall. Particularly disappointing is the absence of Berlin's foreign inhabitants during the postwar era, most notably the Turkish community, but also allied soldiers. The role of foreigners in the shaping of Berlin's identity is a crucial theme that runs through *Berlin* (both the book and the city). Large alludes to the attitudes of foreign observers throughout the book, but a more explicit focus on the experiences of foreigners could have helped to better illuminate the everyday reality of Berlin's cosmopolitan aspirations and its relation to the city's "inferiority complex." However, the biggest shortcomings of the book are the lack of a bibliography and the confusing citation method. Readers hoping to utilize Large's text as a starting point for further research into any specific era might be frustrated by the absence of a bibliography. There are many references hidden in the notes but the citation style makes it cumbersome to access them. However,

this is more a problem with the book's layout, not its content.

This book is a must-read for anyone interested in Berlin's urban culture. Large provides a very insightful overview of Berlin's rich history during the past 130 years. Intended for a broad audience, this book should be of interest to anyone—laymen, students and professionals alike—who are curious about Berlin's tumultuous past (and hopefully this book will be translated into German soon so that it may be available to an even larger audience). Perhaps scholars will not discover much in the way of new information, but all the same, they will be captivated by the eloquence and wit with which Large presents his materials. This fascinating narrative about "the signature city of the twentieth century" should inspire us to reflect upon and consider anew the chronology of Berlin and the twentieth century more generally. This book is certainly a most welcome addition to the growing literature about Berlin. Given the amount of this literature, there is certainly a growing need for a critical review essay that discusses recent Berlin historiography, and David Clay Large, who is clearly one of the city's most prolific observers and avid historians, would be the perfect author for such an essay.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Dorothee Brantz. Review of Large, David Clay. *Berlin*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. February, 2001.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4953>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.