

Arthur Felix Broomfield Prize

Academic Report on history thesis
research in Berlin

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Abstract

This report examines dictatorship in modern German history through a Berlin-based field archive spanning sites connected to National Socialism and the German Democratic Republic. Using Bebelplatz, Humboldt University, Berlin Cathedral, the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, the Topography of Terror, the Stasi Museum and the Berlin Wall, the report argues that totalitarian power operated not only through violence and formal institutions, but also through the regulation of knowledge, the bureaucratisation of repression, and the remaking of public space. Across the archive, a recurring pattern emerges: regimes sought legitimacy and stability by controlling ideas, education, surveillance, and historical memory. The Berlin sites also reveal the importance of historical specificity, since National Socialist and East German dictatorship took different ideological forms while sharing similar administrative logics. Together, the fieldwork supports a broader argument that modern dictatorship should be understood as an attempt to reshape the intellectual, political, and material conditions of society.

1. Introduction

This report brings together research conducted across Berlin as part of a wider study of dictatorship, political authority, and historical interpretation. The archive begins with the symbolic landscape of central Berlin, where Bebelplatz, Humboldt University, the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag together reveal the relationship between intellectual life, state power, and political rupture. It then moves to the institutional sites of National Socialist repression at the Topography of Terror, before concluding with the surveillance state of the German Democratic Republic at the Stasi Museum and the Berlin Wall. Across these sites, the central concern is not only how dictatorships governed, but how they structured the conditions under which ideas, institutions, and everyday life could exist at all.

The report is also shaped by a methodological question about the relationship between political theory and history. The fieldwork repeatedly raised the issue of whether ideas are best understood as products of historical circumstance, or whether they can themselves act as forces that shape historical change. This concern was especially visible at Humboldt University, where Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach prompted reflection on the capacity of ideas to intervene in history, rather than simply reflect it. In this sense, the Berlin archive is not just a record of places; it is also a way of testing how far theories of dictatorship can be grounded in concrete historical experience.

2. Methodology

The report adopts a qualitative, site-based historical method. Rather than relying only on secondary literature, it uses direct observation of memorials, museums, monuments, and political landscapes in Berlin to trace how dictatorship was experienced, represented, and remembered. This approach is contextualist in spirit: the meaning of each site is understood through its historical setting, its surrounding institutions, and the political events associated with it. At the same time, the archive is comparative, moving between Nazi Germany and the German Democratic Republic to identify both continuities and differences in the mechanics of totalitarian rule.

The method also connects material landscape to historiographical interpretation. Sites such as Bebelplatz and the Reichstag show how symbols can mark the transition from intellectual freedom to repression and from parliamentary democracy to dictatorship. Sites such as the Topography of Terror and the Stasi Museum reveal the administrative and bureaucratic structures through which coercion was organised. The Berlin Wall adds a spatial dimension, showing how dictatorship could be built into everyday life through borders, barriers, and surveillance. All in all, these sites create a layered historical argument rather than a single linear narrative.

3. Results

The first major finding is that dictatorship in Berlin repeatedly targeted knowledge and intellectual life before, or alongside, more overt forms of repression. Bebelplatz demonstrates this most clearly. The 1933 book burning was not simply an act of censorship; it was a public attempt to redefine the boundaries of legitimate thought. The memorial's emptiness, and its location beside Humboldt University and other institutions of learning and culture, reinforces the idea that totalitarian power sought to dominate the intellectual centre of German society rather than only its political margins. Humboldt University extends this point by showing how universities themselves could be brought into line through dismissals, ideological appointments, and the coordination of academic life.

A second major finding is that National Socialist repression was highly bureaucratic. The Topography of Terror exhibition showed the SS and Gestapo not simply as instruments of terror, but as organisations that expanded through administrative centralisation, legal authority, surveillance, and the coordination of state institutions. Repression was routinised through offices, records, decrees, and chains of command. This suggests that Nazi dictatorship was sustained less by violence alone than by the systematic integration of coercion into state administration.

A third finding is that the German Democratic Republic developed a different but structurally comparable model of control. The Stasi Museum showed a security apparatus oriented toward prevention, documentation, and psychological pressure. The organisation monitored citizens, used pre-trial investigations as a form of control, and relied on the secrecy of its methods to create uncertainty. The Berlin Wall then translated this logic into space: it was not merely a border, but a multi-layered security system that physically constrained movement and made division part of everyday life.

A final result concerns the instability of political symbols. The Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag both show that monuments are not fixed in meaning. The Gate moved from peace to Prussian victory, from National Socialist spectacle to Cold War division and reunification. The Reichstag marked the fragility of parliamentary democracy and the legal destruction that followed the 1933 fire. These sites demonstrate that political authority is often expressed through the reinterpretation of inherited landscapes as much as through the creation of new institutions.

4. Discussion

The archive suggests that modern dictatorship should be understood as more than a system of punishment or emergency rule. In both National Socialist Germany and the German Democratic Republic, political power depended on shaping the conditions under which people could think, speak, move, and belong. Bebelplatz and Humboldt University show that ideological control begins in the realm of knowledge. The Topography of Terror shows that terror becomes effective when it is bureaucratised. The Stasi Museum and Berlin Wall show that surveillance can be extended into the most ordinary dimensions of social life. In this sense, dictatorship appears not only as a regime type, but as a comprehensive attempt to reorganise society.

The archive also supports a comparative argument. Although National Socialism and the GDR differed profoundly in ideology, both relied on institutions that controlled information, monitored populations, and transformed administration into a tool of political dominance. This does not mean the regimes were the same. Nazi rule was driven by racial ideology, expansion, and mass extermination, while East German rule was shaped by socialist doctrine, Soviet influence, and internal surveillance. But the comparison shows that totalitarian regimes often share a structural dependence on bureaucracy, policing, and symbolic control.

Finally, the fieldwork sharpens a historiographical issue central to the wider project: the tension between contextual specificity and theoretical portability. The archive repeatedly shows that political concepts cannot be detached from the circumstances in which they arose. At the same time, the recurrence of surveillance, ideological discipline, and administrative coercion across different regimes suggests that theories of dictatorship can still travel, provided they remain sensitive to historical context. The Berlin sites therefore do not simply illustrate a thesis; they complicate it, by showing that ideas both emerge from history and help organise how history is understood.

5. Conclusion

This Berlin field archive demonstrates that dictatorship in twentieth-century Germany was built through more than direct coercion. It operated through the destruction and control of ideas, the capture of universities, the bureaucratisation of terror, the expansion of surveillance, and the remaking of public space.

The broader conclusion here, is that modern dictatorship is best understood as an attempt to control not only the state, but the conditions of social and intellectual life. Berlin provides a uniquely powerful setting for this argument because its landmarks preserve the traces of monarchy, democracy, dictatorship, division, and reunification within a single city. The archive therefore supports both a historical and a theoretical claim: dictatorship is never only institutional, and political theory is never fully separable from the histories that produce it.

6. Sample photo archive



Particularly striking quote in the grand stairwell of Humboldt University which translated to English reads - "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." - One of Karl Marx's most famous statements, known as the 11th thesis on Feurbach (1845).

Topography of Terror documentation - Photograph at the time identifying the "Führer Cult" that surrounded Hitler in this instance, at the Harvest Thanksgiving Festival which the Nazi Regime declared a public holiday from 1933 - 37. He was viewed at the time by many as the idol of the masses.



erklärt: Adolf Hitler als Idol der Massen beim
Erntedankfest, 3. Oktober 1933.
Im NS-Regime zum gesetzlichen Feiertag erklärte.
Bischof hat seit 1933 jährlich, zuletzt 1937 als vor



A plaque that forms part of the Empty Library Memorial in remembrance of the Book Burning in Bebelplatz, Germany 1933.

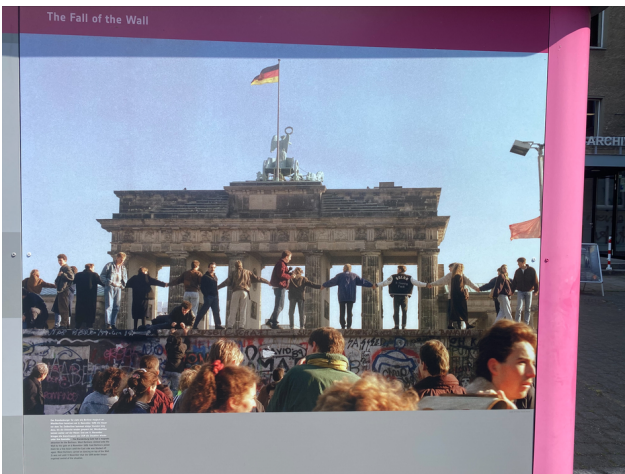
Here the quotation on the plaque is a quote from Heinrich Heine in 1821 whose book was one of many that got destroyed, translated to English reading - "When they start burning books, they will ultimately start burning people".

This quote was widely used as a prophetic warning of the Holocaust that followed Nazi censorship.



Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin - This photograph shows the reconstructed Allied checkpoint that marked the border between East and West Berlin during the Cold War. Visible is the replica guardhouse and the famous "You are leaving the American Sector" sign. The sight of one of the most dangerous standoffs of the Cold War in 1961 - where American and Soviet tanks faced each other at the border with live ammunition for 16 hours.

Information panel at the Berlin Wall memorial - demonstrating how the SED dictatorship used the Berlin Wall to enforce political control, restrict freedom of movement and prevent citizens from fleeing to the West. This photo highlights the human cost of the border - not only through the separation of families, friends and loved ones, but through imprisonment and people being killed.



Historical image displayed at the Stasi Museum of the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. Once a symbol of Germany's division during the Cold War, the Gate became the powerful symbol of freedom and reunification as crowds gathered to celebrate the reopening of the border between East and West Berlin.