



A walk through war-torn Berlin in 1945

AMERICAN JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR to the monumental *'Rise and Fall of the Third Reich'*, William L. Shirer, will be known to most people taking an interest in twentieth-century history. Shirer also wrote *'A Berlin Diary'*, and *'The Nightmare Years'*, covering the years 1934-40, where he lived in Berlin, and portraying life in Germany as well as the leading figures of the Nazi regime in the prelude to war. The latter is dramatized in a 1989 Tv-series of the same name.

Shirer left Berlin in December 1940 and consequently his diary does not cover the war years in the German capital, but he returned in October 1945; a visit that spawned a new book he named; *'End of a Berlin Diary'*.¹

In this book Shirer reflects – sometimes pretty harshly – over the war and the guilt and the nature of the German people. His generalizations are noticeably marked by the time in which they were written, they are also heavily biased at times and all in all of little interest here.²

Shirer, however, also recounts his stunned observations, seeing the metropolis he left in pristine condition only five years earlier now reduced to a mere moonscape. He does so by taking us on a walk through a part of central Berlin, commenting as we go along.

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NOTE: Obviously, the ruins Shirer saw and describe here have either been demolished or rebuilt as the years have passed. Thus, some places will be virtually unrecognizable today, but I hope the photos used for illustration³ will serve as a link to the past, making it possible for you to visualize what a location looked like back then, should you attempt to take the walk. It worked for me.

► **Tuesday, October 30, 1945:** That first view of Berlin from the air this afternoon! The great city demolished almost beyond recognition. The center of the capital around the *Leipzigerstrasse* and the *Friedrichstrasse* a vast acreage of rubble. Most of the little streets I knew, gone, erased as off a map. The railway stations *Potsdamerbahnhof*, *Anhalterbahnhof*, *Lehrterbahnhof* - gaunt shells.

The *Imperial Palace* of the Kaisers roofless, some of its wings pulverized, and here and there the outer walls battered in. The *Tiergarten* like any other battlefield from the air, pockmarked with shell holes; the old spreading trees that I had known, bare stumps. And as far as you can see in all directions, from a plane above the city, a great wilderness of debris, dotted with roofless burnt-out buildings that look like little mousetraps with the low autumn sun shining through the spaces where windows had been.

TEMPELHOF



► When we flew over Tempelhof the ground officer would not let us land. Ground fog, he said, though we could see the field perfectly.

"How about a little tour of your old stamping-ground?" the pilot asked. When we ran out of gas in half an hour, the stubborn officer would have to let us land, he said. I crawled into the co-pilot's seat. Around and around the sprawling city we circled. But I could not take it all in so quickly. My brain became blurred. Soon I was lost staring down at the awful wasteland.

Our gas was about gone. The pilot was arguing with Tempelhof field on his radio. The ground officer kept ordering him back to Wiesbaden, two hundred miles away. Ground fog, he kept saying, though visibility was so good we could see from two thousand feet the faces of German prisoners of war repairing the field.

The pilot began to perspire.

"Why not land at Gatow?" I said. *"It's the RAF field and I know it well. I used to sail on the Wannsee near by when Gatow was a Luftwaffe base."*

"Give me the Berlin map," the pilot said to his co-pilot. But there was none to be found.

"I'll guide you in," I said. There was really ground fog at Gatow, but we made it on the second try.

Toward sundown we got permission to come into Tempelhof. In this district around the airfield I had had my home for three years, but I could not make it out. Then from the canal and the S-Bahn tracks I got my bearings. As we banked toward the field I saw our old house. It was still standing, and with a roof - the only intact building in the entire neighborhood. Had Frau K., who owned it, survived, then? She had not liked the Nazis, who had hounded her husband to the grave; he had been a famous flying ace of the First World War who had refused to knuckle down to Göring. But like all Germans she had pitched in to help win the war for Nazi Germany. The last night I had seen her she had talked for hours about her patriotic duty as a German. And Germany would win, she had said. Well, at least her roof was still standing.

It was dark this night before I got billeted in an atrociously furnished middle-class villa of a German washing-machine manufacturer in Zehlendorf-West. Will have to wait until tomorrow to prowl through the remains.

KU'DAMM



► **A FOGGY, CHILLY MORNING**, my first in Berlin. Very much like the last one on December 5, 1940, when I drove to Tempelhof to get away. I remember it was snowing then.

But, ah, Berlin this morning! The utter wasteland where once stood the proud capital of the regime that Hitler said would last a thousand years.

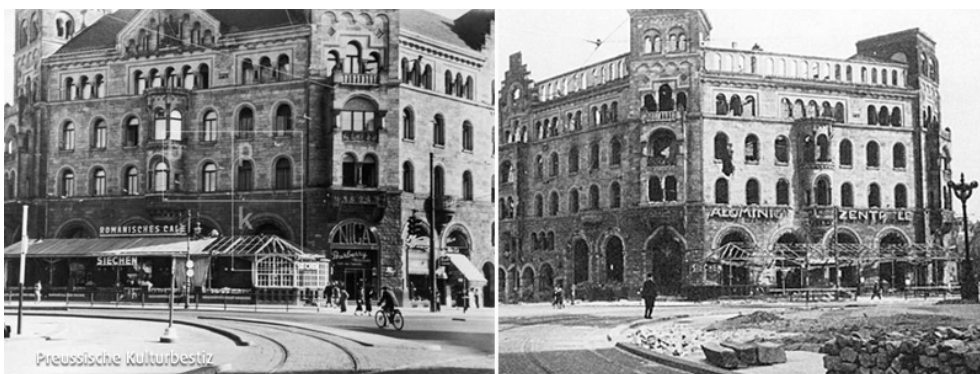
We drove in through the *Kurfürstendamm* from the American sector in southwest Berlin. Someone had told me this equivalent of New York's Fifth Avenue had escaped the heavy bombing. But hardly a house was intact. On both sides of the wide street you could see, through the fog, that the houses were mere facades, the buildings but gaunt skeletons. Through the window spaces or through gaping holes torn by bombs and shells you could see the debris.

GEDÄCHTNISKIRCHE



► **WE CAME TO THE GEDÄCHTNISKIRCHE** - the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church - where the *Kurfürstendamm* turns half-right into the *Taentzienstrasse*. One remembered what a hideous edifice it had been. In the fog it loomed up suddenly and strange the contours of its battered remains so softened by the gray light that it looked almost a thing of beauty.

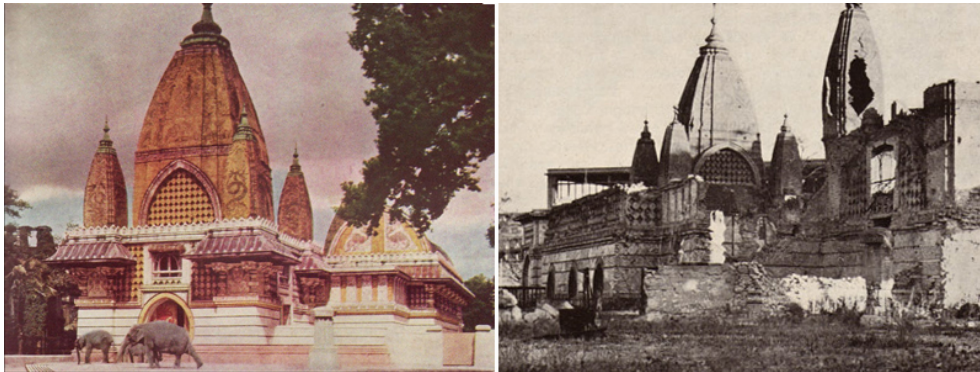
ROMANISCHES CAFE



► **WE GOT OUT OF THE CAR** and strolled around the neighborhood, a familiar one to me, for I had lived up the street in the *Taentzienstrasse* at one time and, like everyone else in Berlin, had always patronized the restaurants, cafes and movie palaces of the quarter. Now I could scarcely recognize it. The *Romanisches Café*, where the Berlin bohemians used to forgather, was largely rubble. The *Eden Hotel*,⁴ down the *Budapesterstrasse*, where the

racy girls of the town hung out, was entirely rubble. How had these light-hearted damsels, I wondered, taken the horrors of the bombing and the bombardment? All the buildings across from the church on the south side of the zoo were smashed in. One of them, a gaudy place where we had occasionally dined and danced, was no more.

ZOO



► **BUT THE ZOO?** What was that I read in the local newspapers this morning? Something about the director of the zoo assuring the population that the animals would be fed as usual this winter. The Berliners, who are hungry themselves, will not resent that. Curious - man's (or at least, the German's) tenderness toward animals, even the wild, vicious ones, in contrast to the way he treats his fellow men.

GLORIA PALAST



► **OPPOSITE THE FACADE** of the church the *Gloria Palast*, a popular movie house was just a mound of broken bricks and stone. German women, some of whom looked - from their fur jackets - as though they had once been staunch, if smug, members of the middle class (Hitler's most fanatical supporters), formed a chain gang, passing broken brick to one another with their dainty hands.

LOOTING



► **A RUSSIAN MOTOR CONVOY** rounded the church, a long file of Chevrolet trucks filled with loot. The pickings must be getting slim. Aside from a few bicycles, there seemed to be only junk - piping, wheels, broken machinery. [Photo is from Alte Potsdamer Strasse. Weinhaus Huth – right, with the small tower – is standing to this day]

KRANZLER



► **WE WALKED UP THE KURFÜRSTENDAMM.** The beer-halls on the right, in which one had spent many an evening trying to forget the Nazis, were all smashed in. *Kranzler's* cafe-restaurant, where in the crisp autumn you used to go for Rebhuhn [partridge] and red kraut, washed down with a dry Rhine

wine, was just another ruin. And so it went. Life had been gaudy on this broad avenue between the wars.

EAST-WEST AXIS



► **WE LEFT IT** and hit down the *East-West Axis* - the triumphal boulevard that Hitler had widened from the old Charlottenburger Chaussee into a sort of *Via Triumphale* down which his goose-stepping supermen used to parade in the brief hours of the Nazi glory. As a reporter, before the war, I had often stood in the reviewing stand and watched them, a feeling of despair and disgust gnawing at my stomach. Up this broad, flag-bedecked avenue Hitler's new tanks and huge self-propelled guns had lumbered by, sending the German people massed along the curbs into wonderful ecstasy, and the rest of the world's people, when they read our dispatches or listened to our broadcasts, into hysterical fear.

SIEGESALLEE



► **THIS BOULEVARD**, which cut a wide ribbon through the wooded Tiergarten, had come to stand, for me, as an ugly symbol of Nazi Germany's military might, as the near-by *Sieges-Allee*, with its ugly statues

of all the Prussian *Fürsts*, *Kurfürsts*, and kings had stood for the cruel, pompous, vain glory of Prussia. But before I left Berlin, the great street's symbolism - at least for me - became diluted.

CAMOUFLAGE



► **THE SPACIOUS BOULEVARD** through the *Tiergarten* turned out to be a great landmark for RAF pilots in the night and lured to watch them fly up and down it as if they owned it ... Hitler, enraged, had had the avenue covered at great expense with wire netting to camouflage it from the British bombers, but one night a fierce wind from the east had blown the covering down, and even the Berliners had chuckled. Yes, the mighty symbol was fading, even then.

WRECKS



► **NOW A GANG OF GERMAN PRISONERS** of war were at work on the once proud avenue, filling the holes made by the bombs and shells. Beyond the curbs, on both sides, the *Tiergarten*, which for so many years had been the scene of my walks and my meditations and whose wonderful rose garden in June had been a special delight, looked like a dozen other battlefields I had seen. Here the Nazi die-hards had made their last stand after the Reich Chancellery had fallen and Hitler and his mistress and Goebbels and his wife and children had liquidated themselves. Half of the great trees had been

shot away, and the ground was criss-crossed with trenches and fox-holes and scattered with the rusty things you see on any battlefield - parts of tanks, armored cars, half-trucks, guns, helmets, and so on.⁵

SIEGESSAULE



► **CURIOSLY ENOUGH**, that ugly abortion the *Siegessäule* - the Victory Column - was still standing in the middle of the Grosser Stern. Neither British and American bombs nor Russian shells had toppled it over. But high in the gray sky - the fog was clearing a little now - you could make out a French flag floating atop it, atop this Germanic monument to Prussia's victory over France in 1871.⁶

RUSSIAN MEMORIAL



► **ONE GOT ANOTHER REMINDER** of how often in history - as in our personal lives - the tables are turned. Two thirds of the way down the AXIS toward the Brandenburger Gate, on the left side, hundreds of workmen were laboring like beavers behind an enormous scaffolding. Howard said it was to be a *mammoth monument*⁷ to the Red Soldier to commemorate the Russian troops killed in the Battle of Berlin. It was to be unveiled, he said, on November 7, the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution - in just a week now.⁸

BRANDENBURG GATE



► **WE DROVE ON THROUGH** the *Brandenburger Gate*, which was still standing though a horse or two in the statuary atop it had been badly wounded and the Grecian columns were nicked with shrapnel. The *Pariserplatz*, just beyond the gate, which had been pretty much the geographical center of my life in Berlin during the war years (for I lived at the Adlon and went much to the *American Embassy* nearby), was scarcely recognizable.⁹

HOTEL ADLON



► **THE ADLON WAS A SHELL**; the Embassy completely destroyed, as was the French Embassy across the little square. There was a sign on the battered front door of the Adlon, through which I had passed so often in my Berlin years. It announced bravely that “Five O’clock Tea” was being served. “*But where?*” I asked Howard [Shirer’s guide]. Through the broken walls of the once famous hostelry you could see nothing but debris. “*In the cellar,*” Howard said. “*And some of the old waiters are still around in their long, formal coats and starched collars just as if nothing had changed.*”

WILHELMSTRASSE



► **WE TURNED INTO THE WILHELMSTRASSE**, that famous little street from whose ugly ministerial buildings and palaces first Prussia and then Germany has been ruled with an iron hand that brought little good to the world.

As far as you could see down the street, not a single building stood intact. Debris was piled up on the sidewalks and spilled over on to most of the street. After six months of work dealing up the ruins, a path only wide enough for two cars to pass had been cleared.

► **ON THE RIGHT-HAND SIDE** Hindenburg's old palace, which Ribbentrop had taken over and had remodeled the first year of the war (despite the shortage of labor and materials), was just a part of the catacomb of rubble that stretched down the Wilhelmstrasse until your eyes lost it. Some of the walls still stood: The interior was completely destroyed.

The Foreign Office farther down, where we had been convoked so often by the insufferable Ribbentrop every time Germany broke another treaty or attacked a new neighbor, was similarly gutted, though its staunch front walls, blackened from fire, remained.

► **BACK THERE ON THE LEFT-HAND SIDE** of the street the shell of a building where Rudolf Hess, who as the Nuremberg trials approach is now feigning madness, used to have his office. Next to it another shell where the clown Putzi Hanfstängel used to receive us before he fell out of favor with his Führer.¹⁰

► **FARTHER DOWN ON THE LEFT**, the few remains of the Propaganda Ministry. I could only recognize it by its position at the end of the street before you came into the square. Most of its walls were gone, and the interior - those palatial rooms where the little worm Goebbels had so often strutted in (despite his limp) to lecture us and lie to us; and where, after the war began, we had assembled each afternoon for a press conference presided over by the cocky Dr. Boehmer and his gang of liars - was simply a mess of twisted girders and pulverized brick and plaster.¹¹

► **FINALLY, ACROSS THE STREET** from the Propaganda Ministry, the remains of the place where the war had been plotted; Hitler's Chancellery. The Russians, you could see, had pretty well cleaned it up though, Howard said, it had been in an awful mess when the Russians stormed it the day after an orgy of suicides and murders in the bunker underneath had at last removed Hitler, his mistress Eva Braun, Goebbels and his wife and children, and a few other bitter-enders from this world.

A rather bedraggled Russian sentry stood guard over the doorway. He seemed chilly and bored. Would he have been bored, though, I thought, if he had had my memories of that particular building?

NEW CHANCELLERY



► **HOW MANY TIMES HAD I STOOD** opposite on the curb and watched the comings and goings of the great! They would drive up in their black super-Mercédès cars, the fat bemedaled Göring, the snake-like little Goebbels, though he lived just across the street, the arrogant, stupid Ribbentrop, though he lived a mere hundred yards down the street - these and Hess and the drunkard Ley and the debauched-looking little Funk with the small eyes of a pig and the sadist Himmler (though he looked like a mild schoolmaster) and the other swashbuckling party hacks and then the generals, their necks stiff even when they dismounted from a car, one eye inevitably squeezing a monocle, their uniforms immaculately pressed. They would come, be saluted by the guard of honor, and pass within this building to plot their wars and their conquests.

Today, I reflected standing there in front of the Chancellery's ruins, they are all dead or in jail. This building too, in whose stately rooms they worked out so confidently and cold-bloodedly their obscene designs, is like them, smashed forever.¹²

KAISERHOF



► **WE WENT ON FROM THE CHANCELLERY**, turned left past the *Kaiserhof*, the hotel that had been Hitler's headquarters before he came to power and where, during the war years, I had often snatched an evening meal before the broadcasts. On many a dark night I had swallowed down my food and watched the Nazis in another corner toasting their early victories as if they already owned the earth. About all that is left of this little Nazi citadel is the charred front wail, on which you can make out the blurred word: "Kaiserhof."¹³

► **BEYOND THE HOTEL** the street was blocked by a mountain of debris. This part of town, stretching out from the corner of the Friedrichstrasse and Leipzigerstrasse, was so pulverized by Anglo-American bombing that we soon became lost. All the familiar little old streets leading into it and through it have been erased. We finally found the Friedrichstrasse, through which bulldozers had driven a path, and drove up it to the Unter den Linden. The broad avenue, once lined with stately linden trees, which had been so familiar to American tourists and such a pride of the Berliners, was unrecognizable. It was piled with rubble, and all of the buildings on both sides were gutted or smashed in.

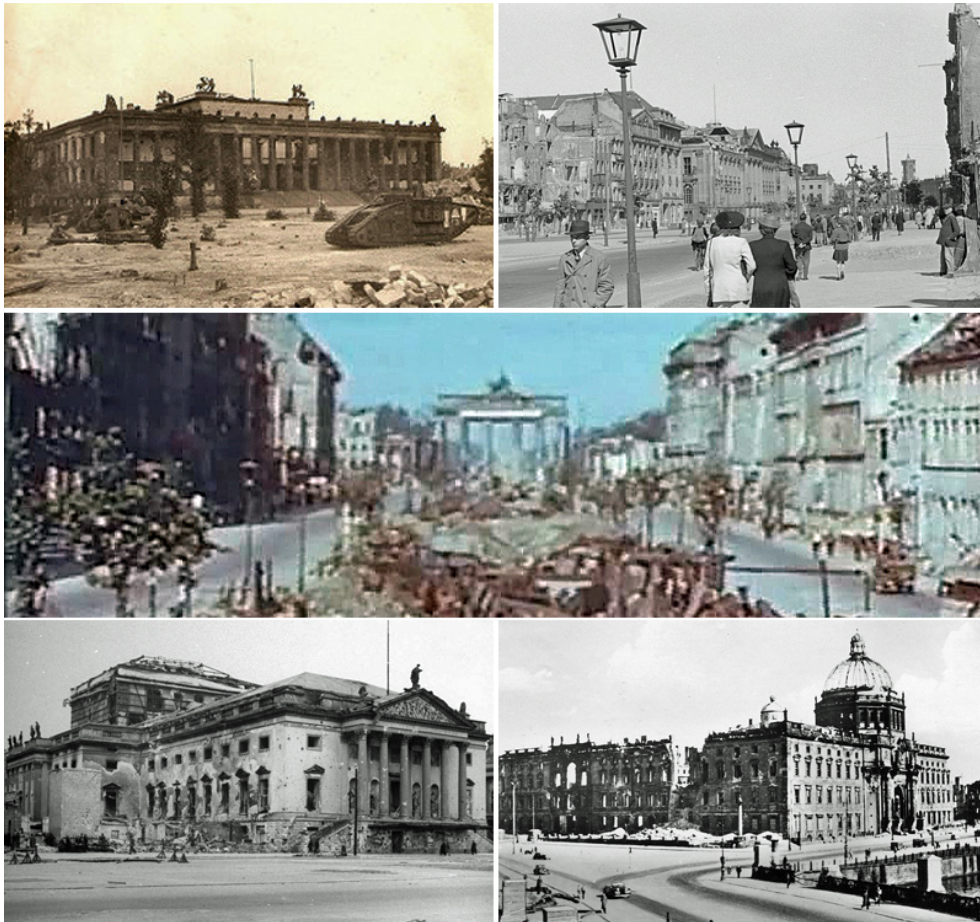
KRANZLER



► **WE TURNED RIGHT** on the Linden toward the Schloss. *Kranzler's*, on the corner, where one used to go for tea or chocolate in the dim days when one

had the time and the taste for such things, was gone. A direct hit, probably. Up the Linden a few doors, I looked for Habel's wine house, a pleasant inn where I had had, on occasion, much good wine and food and talk. It too had shared the fate of the district.

UNTER DEN LINDEN



► **THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY** on the left of the avenue was a mess, as were, in fact, all the university buildings near by. The *Zeughaus* - the War Museum - where samples of all the lethal weapons of all the German wars were kept and honored was badly smashed in.

► **ON THE RIGHT**, the main part of the *State Opera*, to which I had often repaired when one could still listen to music, was in ruins, though the front part looked as though it could be salvaged.

► **THE LUSTGARTEN**, where one had listened to Göring and Goebbels haranguing the delirious German masses, showed signs of having been fought over during the Battle of Berlin. Bizarre: two battered British tanks from the First World War were piled up on the square.

► **THE KAISER'S FORMER IMPERIAL PALACE** we found badly wrecked - past repair, I should say. The university quarter, down toward the river Spree, had received an awful shellacking from bombs and shells. Most of its buildings were gone, though the statue of Hegel, I noticed, stood there in the very midst of the ruins, practically unnicked.¹⁴

ALEXANDERPLATZ



► **WITH DIFFICULTY WE MADE OUR WAY** through blocks of rubble to the Alexanderplatz. For the first time we began to see numbers of Russian soldiers, for we were now in the Soviet sector, having passed through the British sector in the Kurfürstendamm and Tiergarten areas. Most of the Russian troops appeared poorly clad, their uniforms dirty and shoddy. Perhaps because they had done so much magnificent fighting in them.¹⁵

BLACK MARKET



► **THE RUSSIANS**, Howard said, had recently received two or three years' back pay in paper Marks, and our GI's had not been slow to take advantage

of it. "Mickey Mouse" watches - whatever they are - fetched ten thousand marks apiece, Howard said, which a GI could convert into one thousand American dollars and send home. Now, however, the army was stepping in to stop the racket, and the Russians were also beginning to co-operate.

Indeed, hardly had we entered the square and paused to see the sinister Gestapo jail and headquarters, which had been nicely smashed, before a large squad of Russian military police began rounding up a hundred or so black-market operators, about a third of whom were Soviet soldiers and the rest German civilians.

THE SIGN

► **WE CAME HOME** by way of Wedding, a German workers' district in northern Berlin and now part of the Russian sector. At every street corner you saw a big Russian poster in German which read: "*The Experience of History Shows that the Hitlers Come and Go, but that the People of the German Nation Live on.*" It was signed: "Stalin." Now our Russian friends, I reflected, stand for a tough peace with Germany because they are determined not to have to defend themselves against any more German attacks. But they know something about propaganda.

We Americans, alas, do not.

LINKS

If William Shirer's impressions after he returned to war-torn Berlin and walked its moonscape streets has spurred your interest for more, there are many great blogs and groups about Berlin and the war to find on i.e. facebook. I cannot list them all, but here are a few of my favorites where you will find lots of photos, stories and information.

BERLIN 1945 (Page) a blog where you can find lots of photos from the Battle for Berlin and postwar Berlin: <https://bit.ly/3CQFd8N>

BERLIN BATTLE DAMAGE (Page) Chronicling the remaining evidence of one of the defining moments in modern history, the battle of Berlin, giving locations and background information: <https://bit.ly/3ugHcjI>

BATTLE OF BERLIN FORUM (Group) in this group you can to discuss anything and everything relevant to the battle of Berlin: <https://bit.ly/39IOJyr>

BERLIN LUFTTERROR (Page) This blog shows historical pics of the city of Berlin during and after the Allied bombing campaign: <https://bit.ly/39YctyR>

BERLIN 1919 – 1989 (Page) is my own blog. As the name indicates, I try to cover Berlin-related events from the interwar years to the end of the Cold War. You will find it here: <https://bit.ly/3uj26ii>

IF YOU HAPPEN TO BE A DANE or Scandinavian, and you want to take a first look at Berlin war history under guidance of trained professionals, here is a splendid option to do so: <https://bit.ly/3CT77Bb>, <https://bit.ly/2Y80NHI>

NOTES

¹ Shirer also attended the 1946 Nuremberg Process and offers wonderfully vitriolic, albeit not completely unbiased observations of the Nazi bigwigs and their appearance in court. I shall regale you with these on another occasion.

² The words are Shirer's. I have added nothing, but I have weeded out some lines and paragraphs that are irrelevant here. For a full account – and much more – you can turn to reading 'End of a Berlin Diary', © 1947, by William L. Shirer, obtainable (second hand) from Amazon at a fairly reasonable price.

³ In my choice of photos to illustrate this tour, I have, where possible, tried to combine pre-war photos with post-war ruin photos. Goes without saying that it cannot always be the exact same angle as with the regular Then & Then. Where the source of a photo is known, credit is given. All others are considered Public Domain, several of them retrieved from the facebook page 'Berlin 1945'. Should I inadvertently have violated anyone's rights, let me know, and I will give the missing credit or, on demand, remove the photo.

⁴ Eden Hotel was also the place where Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht was brutally interrogated by members of the Garde-Kavallerie Schützen Division shortly before their execution on January 15, 1919. The hotel was damaged during WW2 and later demolished.

⁵ Already the year after, 1946, the deforested land of the Tiergarten was put to use for potato farming. The remaining trees felled for firewood in the bitterly cold winter of 1945-46, its five square kilometers of fertile soil in the center of the metropolis provided a much-needed contribution to the meager rations. Reforestation started in 1949, when 250.000 young trees were flown in from West Germany.

⁶ Actually, the Siegestsäule commemorates three victories; over the Danes in 1864, the Austrians in 1866 and finally the French in 1871, and the three lower segments are adorned with cannons captured from the respective nations.

⁷ The Russian taste for architecture may seem a bit crass for westerlings – just look at Karl-Marx-Allee – but it is also awe-inspiring. Another good place to experience just that is the Treptower Park in the south-eastern part of Berlin.

⁸ Shirer's friend wasn't completely right here. The Soviet War Memorial was inaugurated on November 11, 1945, the same day World War One ended in 1918. Rubbing the nose of the vanquished in it, I guess.

⁹ In fact everything you see on Pariser Platz today is post Cold War; the Adlon; Speer's office; Haus Liebermann, everything!. For many years the Brandenburg Gate was a stand-alone in East Berlin, but after the reunification in 1990, it has been rebuilt to resemble what it looked like prewar.

¹⁰ The building Shirer mention here is still standing. It's the Swastika-bedecked one on the compilation. The rest of Wilhelmstrasse is newbuild.

¹¹ Albeit Göbbels' darling; the Ordenspalais on Wilhelmplatz, was hit and destroyed during a Mosquito raid on March 10, 1945, the main building of the Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda is standing tall today. You will find it in Mauerstrasse.

¹² The New Reichs Chancellery is completely gone today (save a few lumps of concrete preserved). The Führerbunker, though allegedly demolished in the 1980ties, still lurks some eight meters underground the 'Plattenbau' that now occupies the spot. A plaque installed in 2006 tells the story.

¹³ Hotel Kaiserhof, too, is gone today. The North Korean Embassy occupies the spot.

¹⁴ The University Library, The State Opera, and the Lustgarten looks pretty much the same today. On the spot of the Imperial Palace – which was demolished by East Berlin authorities – lay for many years the 'Palast der Republik'; a real eye-sore in the face of so many beautiful old buildings. It – too – was demolished ('wrong history' says some) and the Schloss have now been rebuilt. A Potemkin façade perhaps, but undoubtedly prettier than 'Erichs Lampeladen'.

¹⁵ On 'Alex', as the Berliners call the plaza, the Alexanderhaus and the Berolinahaus, along with the S/U-bahn station are war survivors. The rest is to the best of my knowledge newbuild.