



Blog-Reflections on Berlin: A South African Perspective

As part of my PhD training programme at TU Berlin, I had the opportunity to explore the city through two excursions that took us to some of its most significant historical and cultural sites. Walking through Berlin was more than just sightseeing—it was an education in memory, identity, and the ways societies confront painful pasts.

One of the first sites we visited was the Brandenburg Gate, an enduring symbol of both division and unity. For me, it immediately echoed South Africa's own journey—from apartheid's enforced separations to the difficult but ongoing project of building democracy. The gate's transformation from a backdrop to the Berlin Wall to a place of celebration after reunification reminded me of our first democratic elections in 1994, and the symbolism of walking freely to cast a vote for the first time.

The Holocaust Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe was another powerful experience. Walking through the uneven concrete slabs, I felt a deep sense of disorientation and reflection. It prompted me to think about how nations reckon with the darkest parts of their histories. Germany's commitment to remembrance and accountability contrasts with South Africa's own struggles to keep the memory of apartheid alive in public consciousness. While we have museums, archives, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's legacy, there is still an ongoing tension between remembering and moving forward.

Equally striking was visiting the site where Hitler took his life, now marked only by a modest plaque, surrounded by ordinary apartment blocks. The absence of grandeur or glorification felt intentional—a quiet statement about not allowing symbols of hate to gain prominence. As a South African, I thought about how we too grapple with monuments, statues, and public symbols tied to colonialism and apartheid. Berlin's approach showed me that erasure is not always the goal—contextualisation and careful remembrance can also carry profound meaning.

Walking along the remnants of the Berlin Wall and standing at Checkpoint Charlie, I reflected on how physical and invisible walls continue to exist in South Africa. Our cities remain divided by spatial inequality, with race and class shaping where people live, work, and feel they belong. The Berlin Wall may have fallen, but its imprint on the city endures—just as apartheid's spatial and social legacies remain visible in our daily

SMUS Trainee Experience Report

lives. Finally, wandering through Museumsinsel (Museum Island), I was struck by Berlin's commitment to preserving culture and knowledge. At the same time, I couldn't help but think of the calls in South Africa to decolonise museums and universities. Whose stories are told, and whose are silenced? This question, alive in South Africa, also resonates in Berlin's collections and narratives.

Overall, these excursions reminded me that cities are living texts. Berlin's story is one of trauma, division, remembrance, and resilience. As a South African, I left with a renewed appreciation for the importance of memory and the responsibility we carry in shaping a future that learns from, rather than hides, its past.