

The Story of Tempelhof

The grandiose edifice of Tempelhof Airport in Berlin is surely known to the visitors of this web site: its role in the Berlin Airlift of 1948-49 has become legendary, and has been well covered in the literature on the Cold War. In this short article I shall provide a background picture of Tempelhof, focusing on its history and its place within Berlin's urban landscape.

The name "Tempelhof" goes back to the Order of the Temple and the associated commandery founded around the year 1200, but its significance for Berliners was really established in the 19th century. The area of what is today the Tempelhof quarter of Berlin (officially the borough of Tempelhof-Schöneberg) became well known thanks to its vast Tempelhof Field (*Tempelhofer Feld*), made use of by Berliners for weekend strolls, kite-flying, horse riding, sport and a general recuperation from the "madding crowd" of an increasingly industrialized metropolis. The Field was also extensively utilised by the Prussian military and served as a parade ground. With technological advances, the field turned out to be an ideal place not only for aviation pioneers, but also for the large numbers of onlookers who gathered to watch hot-air balloon take-offs, various airship and aviation experiments, as well as the performances of the age's trailblazing pilots. In 1909, visitors witnessed the flight of Orville Wright, the American inquisitive design engineer, and among interested onlookers was even the Crown Prince Wilhelm. In May 1931, the acclaimed airship LZ 127 "Graf Zeppelin" landed on Tempelhof Field, greeted by masses of people. Regular passenger transport at Tempelhof began in the first half of the 1920s, when the first radio station, terminal and headquarters of the pioneer airport were built. This new site, then known as *Zentral-Flughafen Berlin*, slowly but surely replaced the alternative airfield in Johannisthal, south-east of Berlin.

Tempelhof was notably successful in responding to emerging trends in aviation, and in the 1920s and 1930s, it became - next to London Croydon and Paris Le Bourget - a hub of fast growing aerial traffic in Europe, offering flights to a number of cities across the continent and beyond. Its clean, simple, yet innovative terminal building epitomised the then ruling spirit of modernity and openness. This only confirmed the international role of Weimar-era Berlin, with its booming cultural scene, outstripping Paris and Vienna, cities that could be portrayed as old-fashioned and somewhat lagging behind. When *Deutsche Luft Hansa* was founded in 1926, Tempelhof became its home airport and thus its importance increased even more. However, the "Golden Twenties" came to an abrupt end in January 1933 when Adolf Hitler became Chancellor. The programme of National Socialism was a peculiar fusion of honouring "proper" Germanic traditions whilst supporting technological advancement at the same time: attention was paid not only to the grand-scale construction project of the *Autobahnen* and plans for *Volkswagen*, the "people's car," but also to the training of plane designers and aviators in dedicated schools. The Nazi regime was specially enthusiastic about air transportation: Hermann Göring's exclamation "We must become a nation of flyers!" only affirms where the regime was heading.

Owing both to the significance of air-mindedness in Nazi ideological doctrine and to its strategic location, Tempelhof was high on the agenda for the regime and its development of Berlin. On 1st May 1933, Tempelhof Field witnessed a million-strong crowd of people to celebrate the "Day of National Work" (*Tag der nationalen Arbeit*). Hitler delivered a speech, standing on an immense grandstand, garnished with about 20 meter long swastika flags. This stage, characteristically impressive, was constructed by Albert Speer, later to become Hitler's chief architect. The Führer, himself fond of architecture and well aware of its potential to influence the masses, authorized Speer to design the future capital of the Third Reich, *Germania*: Berlin needed, he felt, to be rebuilt in grandiose, sterile and stunningly monumental form. Complementary with this idea, Tempelhof was planned to become the backbone of Nazi aviation, the biggest airport in the world, located on the famous North-South axis of *Germania* and fulfilling the role of an imposing gateway to this new capital – the "air crossing of Europe" (*Luftkreuz Europas*). Even this,

however, was not enough for Nazi megalomaniac ambitions: this intended airfield was only devised as an interim one, to be replaced by another, yet more gigantic airport in the future. Nonetheless, although this odd intention luckily never materialised, Nazi leaders were quick to make use of Tempelhof's suitability and attractiveness for large-scale events, such as during the 1936 Summer Olympics or Mussolini's official visit in 1937. Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda, was in charge of orchestrating the "correct" image for all participants and observers.

With the growing volume of aerial traffic, as well as with the political and strategic demands of Third Reich representatives, it became clear that the existing buildings at Tempelhof, dating back to the 1920s, were unsatisfactory. Architect Ernst Sagebiel, an NSDAP member and author of the Göring's Ministry of Aviation building in the centre of Berlin (today, the Federal Ministry of Finance is housed there), was chosen to design the new terminal building with hangars. Although Sagebiel had initially proposed a rather light, avant-garde draft, in concordance with principles of modernity, it was altered by Albert Speer to conform with his own neo-classical tendencies. The resulting building was the 1.2 km long semi-circle edifice that we know nowadays. Even though the construction had to be stopped because of the war - and thus Tempelhof is still technically unfinished today - the building was one of the biggest monolithic standing structures in the world at that time. A number of trailblazing structural and engineering features were applied, such as the novel overhanging roof above the apron or a proposed grandstand for about 100,000 visitors to be accommodated on the roof - in order to watch Nazi air shows. The latter was never realised, but conspicuous staircase towers, located on the outside of the semi-circle edifice at regular intervals, were planned in order to enable thousands of spectators to climb to and descend from the grandstand in a couple of minutes.

During the war, forced labourers, who originated chiefly from Poland, Czechoslovakia, France and USSR, were assembling bombers for the Luftwaffe in underground parts of the building, and another notable technical feature was a spacious tunnel equipped with rails, utilised during this aircraft production. Labourers lived in barracks close to the terminal building, under atrocious conditions. As the Tempelhof premises had been serving military purposes since at least the 19th century, barracks and adjacent buildings of the Prussian army had been erected on the precincts, including a military prison. This was repurposed by the National Socialists to serve as a Gestapo prison, infamous for its brutal treatment of detainees (typically Jews, Communists and other dissidents and "undesirables"), and between 1934 and 1936 served as a concentration camp under the name "Columbia." The latter had to be demolished, as space was needed for Sagebiel's new terminal building. During the course of the war, Tempelhof itself escaped relatively unscathed, but the advancing Red Army, which reached Tempelhof in April 1945, destroyed the film bunker in which various materials, including the archive of Hansa-Luftbild, were stored. The Soviet flag, which Red Army soldiers raised next to the enormous eagle on the top of the entrance tract of the building, symbolised clearly that a new era was at hand. However, since Tempelhof was located in the American sector of the capital, the US Army took control over it in July 1945. In 1962, the airport was opened for civilian traffic. In between, of course, the famous Airlift took place in 1948-49. Since the readers of this Newsletter are familiar with the details of this enormous achievement, I shall not go in depth of this story, and shall only point out to the volte-face involved: how Tempelhof was now to be understood by Berliners, mostly, of course, by West Berliners, as a gateway to freedom. Leaving behind its murky past, Tempelhof now became a symbol of the free, Western world, pitted against Communist East Berlin and East Germany, and the Soviets. The site retained this reputation well into the following decades, when escapees from the East tried to reach the West via Tempelhof (amongst other possibilities).

What remains rather in the shadow of the huge logistical feat represented by the Airlift is the so called Kinderlift (*Kinderluftbrücke*), organised by volunteers and voluntary organisations between 1953 and 1957. Its objective was to offer the undernourished and impoverished children, who had to remain in the city, a break from the trauma of Cold War Berlin. They were flown from Tempelhof to German and

American families in West Germany where they were looked after during their stay, a couple of weeks long. This initiative was co-supported by none other than William H. Tunner, one of the masterminds behind the Airlift. Although the Kinderlift could help only a fraction of children who were in need, it served two crucial purposes: first, it further confirmed the image of Americans and Britons as Allies who tried to understand and help a formerly enemy nation, and secondly, it gave West Berliners hope for the future and a certain relief. This message was sealed by the engagement of major political figures in the Kinderlift, such as Governing Mayor Ernst Reuter or President Theodor Heuss.

As time went by, Tegel Airport in north-west Berlin increased its capacity and importance, with most airline companies opting for Tegel as their base, and Tempelhof slowly metamorphosed into a smaller airport, rather popular amongst VIPs travelling to the political island of West Berlin. These were sourced either from the cultural sphere, luminaries such as Herbert von Karajan, Maria Callas and Duke Ellington, or politicians such as Edward Heath, King Hussein of Jordan and the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The arrival of the latter in 1967 provoked his opponents into violent demonstrations that claimed the life of a young student and ignited protests that swept through the Federal Republic of Germany in 1968.

The situation changed yet again after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification of Germany. Even though Bonn remained the seat of government at the beginning of the 1990s, Berlin came rapidly into focus of Germans and visitors from abroad, many of them travelling by air. Although Tempelhof's exceptionally favourable location just a couple of underground stops from the city centre was immensely convenient, a group of critics argued against the airport on the ground of security. Since a new international airport was planned to be put in operation around 2010 (the Berlin Brandenburg Airport, still unopened at the time of writing and proposed to be launched in 2017 or 2018), it was decided that Tempelhof would be closed down. The last plane took off on 30th October 2008, shortly before midnight. It was an emotional moment for many, especially for those who perceived Tempelhof as a part of their West Berlin or West German identity. In May 2010, the site was opened to public under a new, and thoroughly significant name "Tempelhof Freedom" (*Tempelhofer Freiheit*). Whilst Berliners and tourists alike kept enjoying the vast space of some 230 hectares, with the two runways used by cyclists, joggers and walkers, the Berlin Senat insisted on the field being redeveloped. A wave of disapproval quickly emerged and a range of public initiatives and volunteer associations launched campaigns against the Senat's "Masterplan." Residents were afraid not only of gentrification, which the proposed - and expensive - flats would worsen, but also of environmental losses. The then Governing Mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, insisted on a new Central and Regional Library Berlin (*Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin*) to be constructed on the field. The majority of citizens disagreed, however, and questioned how these projects would be paid for, given the notably unstable financial situation of the capital. A number of public initiatives appeared, one of the largest was called 100% Tempelhof Field (*100% Tempelhofer Feld*) whose name indicated its goal: to keep the field as it is, undeveloped and accessible freely to anyone. Members of 100% Tempelhof Field collected enough signatures in their support and, in the aftermath, a referendum was held in May 2014 with a telling result: 64.3% of voters turned the Berlin Senat's proposal down. According to local legislation, the result has become law and has to be obeyed by everyone, including the Berlin Senat. Thus, the field survives physically unhampered, albeit its invisible legacy is manifold. The building itself, which has been listed since the 1990s and open to visitors through special guided tours, houses the headquarters of Berlin police, as well as a range of other businesses. Current plans are to turn parts of the colossal structure into a home for creative start-up companies. Meanwhile, the principal terminal hall, the apron and some of the hangars are rented for commercial purposes such as fashion shows, pop concerts and various fairs. Not everyone is happy with this solution, though, as critical voices rise, arguing that commercialism gives too little respect to those who suffered and perished at the site.

In other words, whilst most can agree that the complex history of Tempelhof requires an appropriate form of remembrance, this is not easily achievable. The 1930s and 1940s have been the darkest years in

Tempelhof's history, and the city authorities need to draw the attention of locals and visitors alike to what happened on the site, for it to serve as a warning for the future. Next to commemorative plaques in front of the building, there are thin steel information boards scattered around the premises, complete with historical photographs. There are also ongoing archaeological excavations, with the aim of ascertaining how much of this inglorious epoch remains to be discovered. The project was prepared by a number of academic institutions, cooperating with Berlin authorities. Professor Reinhard Bernbeck, based at the Free University in Berlin, is in charge of the excavations. The idea is to bring the public to the place of digging - following the concept of "place-making activities" - and many people have already participated. A memorial to the concentration camp itself is located next to Columbia Damm, a busy road bordering the northern edge of the precincts. For all that, the appearance, form and location of the memorial is problematic and, as a result, many locals and visitors are surely unaware of it. By contrast, the Airlift Memorial by Eduard Ludwig, on Platz der Luftbrücke, is prominent and well known: its three ribs represent the three air corridors used during the Airlift. When the memorial was inaugurated in 1951, Ernst Reuter delivered a rousing speech to the masses of onlookers. His sentence "Long live the freedom!" has been kept in minds long afterwards. That every year in May this spot witnesses an Airlift anniversary celebration, attended by veterans and friends from around the world, corroborates the continuing importance of this message, and the place of Tempelhof within Berlin's political and historical landscape.

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