

The **Reichstag building** in Berlin was constructed to house the *Reichstag*, parliament of the German Empire. It was opened in 1894 and housed the *Reichstag* until 1933, when it was severely damaged in a fire supposedly set by Dutch communist Marinus van der Lubbe. During the Nazi era, the few meetings of members of the *Reichstag* as a group were held in the Kroll Opera House. After the World War II the Reichstag building fell into disuse as the parliament of the German Democratic Republic met in the Palace of the Republic in East Berlin and the parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany met in the Bundeshaus in Bonn.

The building was made safe against the elements and partially refurbished in the 1960s, but no attempt at full restoration was made until after the reunification of Germany on October 3, 1990, when it underwent reconstruction led by internationally renowned architect Norman Foster. After its completion in 1999, it became the meeting place of the modern German parliament, the Bundestag.

Construction of the Reichstag building began well after 1871. Previously, the parliament had assembled in several other buildings in Leipziger street in Berlin; but these were generally considered too small; so in 1872 an architectural contest with 103 participating architects was carried out to erect an all-new building. Work did not start until ten years later though, owing to various problems with purchasing property for the new building and arguments between Wilhelm I, Otto von Bismarck, and the members of the *Reichstag* about how the construction should be performed.

In 1882, another architectural contest was held, with 200 architects participating. This time the winner, the Frankfurt architect Paul Wallot, would actually have his plan executed. On 29 June 1884, the foundation stone was finally laid by Wilhelm I. Before construction was completed in 1894, Wilhelm I died. His successor, Wilhelm II, objected to parliament as an institution to a much greater extent. The original building was most acclaimed for the construction of an original cupola of steel and glass, an engineering masterpiece of the time.

In 1916 the iconic words "Dem Deutschen Volke" ("To the German people") were carved above the main façade of the building, much to the displeasure of Wilhelm II who had tried to block the adding of the inscription for its democratic significance. After World War I had ended and Wilhelm had abdicated, during the revolutionary days of 1918, Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed the institution of a republic from one of the balconies of the *Reichstag* building on 9 November. The building continued to be the seat of the parliament of the Weimar Republic (1919–1933).

The building caught fire on 27 February 1933, under circumstances still not entirely clear and after that it was used for Nazi propaganda presentations and, during World War II, for military purposes. It was also considered to be turned into a flak tower, because of its general similarity, but was found to be structurally unsuitable. The building was set to be restored and incorporated into Adolf Hitler's plans for Welthauptstadt Germania but would have been really small by the huge new buildings planned for the city by Hitler and Albert Speer.

The building, having never been fully repaired since the fire, was further damaged by air raids. During the Battle of Berlin in 1945, it became one of the central targets for the Red Army, most probably for its symbolic significance. Today, visitors to the building can still see Soviet graffiti

on smoky walls inside as well as on some of the roof, which was preserved during the reconstructions after reunification.

## **Cold War**

When the Cold War emerged, the building was physically within West Berlin, but only a few metres from the border of East Berlin, which ran around the back of the building and in 1961 was closed by the Berlin Wall. During the Berlin blockade, an enormous number of West Berliners assembled before the building on 9 September 1948, and Mayor Ernst Reuter held his famous speech asking people of the world to look upon this city.

After the war, the building was essentially a ruin. In addition, there was no real use for it, since the capital of West Germany had been established in Bonn in 1949. Still, in 1956, after some debate, it was decided that the *Reichstag* should not be torn down, but be restored instead. However, the cupola of the original building, which had also been heavily damaged in the war, was demolished. Another architectural contest was held, and the winner, Paul Baumgarten, reconstructed the building from 1961–1964.

Until 1990, the building was used only for occasional representative meetings, and one-off events. It was also used for a widely lauded permanent exhibition about German history called Questions on German history.

## **Reunification**

The official German reunification ceremony on 3 October 1990, was held at the *Reichstag* building. One day later, the parliament of the united Germany would assemble in an act of symbolism in the *Reichstag* building.

However, at that time, the role of Berlin had not yet been decided upon. Only after a fierce debate, finally in 1991 the *Bundestag* concluded that both government and parliament will return from Bonn to Berlin.

In 1992, Norman Foster won another architectural contest for the reconstruction of the building. His winning concept looked very different from what was later executed. Notably, the original design did not include a cupola. During the reconstruction, the building was first almost completely gutted, taking out everything except the outer walls, including all changes made by Baumgarten in the 1960s. The reconstruction was completed in 1999.

The *Reichstag* is now the most visited attraction in Berlin, not least because of the huge glass dome that was erected on the roof as a gesture to the original 1894 cupola, giving an impressive view over the city, especially at night.