

Berlin's History: Local Traces, Global Themes

15 June – 10 July 2026

CATEGORY History, Politics, Geography, European Studies, and more generally Social Sciences and Cultural Studies

COURSE STRUCTURE

You will receive a total of **45 hours of academic lessons** (one lesson equals 45 minutes; 15 hours per week). Lessons will comprise lectures, group work, discussion sessions, and excursions.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

HUWISU courses are grouped into different time tracks. Your course will take place in **Track B**

Monday: 9.00 am – 10.30 am & 11.00 am – 12.30 pm

Wednesday: 9.00 am – 10.30 am & 11.00 am – 12.30 pm

Thursday: 1.30 pm – 3.00 pm & 3.30 pm – 5.00 pm

COURSE LANGUAGE

This course is taught in **English**, including the readings. For the understanding of the texts and the discussions in class, a language-level of B2 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) is required.

TARGET GROUP

Undergraduate and postgraduate students with an interest in history, politics, geography, European Studies, public history, and more generally social sciences and cultural studies.

CREDITS & CERTIFICATES

Participants will receive **6 ECTS** credit points and a certificate if they attend regularly (at least 80% attendance), participate actively and fulfil all course assignments. Additionally, six weeks after the end of the course a Transcript of Records is issued by Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. All courses are accredited according to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

In addition to the academic program, you are invited to **join our cultural and social program**. We offer a fine selection of interesting activities that aim to give you an unforgettable stay in Berlin. Through excursions, social gatherings, and sport activities, you have the opportunity to get to know the city, the university, and to meet students from all parts of the world. **Costs for these offers are included in the program fee**. Below, you find examples of previously offered cultural activities. You will be informed about the respective cultural program shortly before the start of the program via email as well as during the course period.



POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL GUIDED TOURS

- Federal Chancellery (*Bundeskanzleramt*)
- German Parliament (*Bundestag*)
- House of Representatives (*Abgeordnetenhaus*)
- Topography of Terror exhibition
- Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office

CULTURAL GUIDED TOURS

- Kreuzberg Tour
- Museum Island (*Museumsinsel*)
- Berlin Cathedral (*Berliner Dom*)
- Daytrip to Potsdam
- Exhibitions

SOCIAL GATHERINGS

- Welcome Session
- Beach Volleyball
- Farewell Get2gether

EXPECTATIONS & POLICIES

Preparation for lively discussions in the classroom: Be on time, have at least the required readings completed, and points in mind for discussion or clarification.

Assignments: Complete all assignments according to the specified requirements on the schedule including handing them over to the lecturer.

Commitment in class: Pay particular attention to the lecturer and respect differences of opinions (classmates', lecturers').

Academic guidelines: Comply with academic integrity policies (such as no plagiarism or cheating, nothing unethical) especially the academic honor code and the student code of conduct.

Attendance policy: No unexcused absences are permitted. Students must follow teachers' instructions to catch up on missed work – to excuse absence please contact the HUWISU office.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Berlin has undergone profound transformations over the past 150 years, evolving from the capital of the Kingdom of Prussia to the modern capital of a unified Germany at the heart of the European Union. It has been a site of political extremes, ranging from imperial ambitions and colonialism to the turbulence of the Weimar Republic, the horrors of the Nazi regime, and the division of the Cold War. Alongside these upheavals, Berlin has also witnessed moments of resistance, cultural innovation, and social change, including flourishing avant-garde movements, underground subcultures, and LGBTQ+ scenes. These dramatic changes and contradictions have left lasting marks on the city and its residents. Together, we will trace these developments, connect them, and assess their global significance.

The course follows a chronological structure, engaging with key political themes such as the Enlightenment, imperialism, colonialism, Nazism, socialism, and democracy. Some topics will be examined across time periods, including nationalism, racism, migration and belongingness, as well as arts, music, dance and nightlife culture. In each chapter of Berlin's history, we will ask what political agency ordinary people had in shaping history, and how political and socio-economic systems influenced individual and collective identities. On every site visit and walking tour we furthermore analyze memorialization practices and discuss how contemporary societal shifts shape historical narratives.

Course participants may have greatly varying levels of prior knowledge, but ample readings will be provided to ensure a common foundation. At the same time, the seminar discussions will benefit from the diverse perspectives students bring in – be it through comparisons with other geographical regions, or by applying methodologies and insights from other academic disciplines. The increased interdisciplinarity will give students the opportunity to co-shape the course themes, and help us determining the significance of the historical events in Berlin.

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Analyze present-day Berlin as the result of historical developments over past centuries.
- Formulate their own opinions on debates and controversies surrounding key historical events in Berlin and their significance for German and international history.
- Recognize recurring themes in German and European history, and have gained or refreshed an overview of key developments, concepts and terms.
- Compare and contrast the development of Berlin/German society with the society they have grown up in or are most familiar with.
- Explore Berlin's urban environment and critically analyze efforts in preservation, rebuilding, memorialization, as well as historical absences in the built environment.
- Engage in current debates about the preservation and use of historic spaces and buildings, the effectiveness of local museums and curated historical sites, and controversies surrounding street names.
- Apply the acquired analytical skills to other European cities they visit.

READINGS

Literature, websites, and film clips for each session will be provided via Moodle or through weblinks under each session's description. There is no single book covering the entire course. However, a readable overview, from which we will read selected chapters, is **John Kampfner's *In Search of Berlin: The Story of a Reinvented City* (Atlantic Books: London, 2023), or alternative edition *In Search of Berlin: The Story of Europe's Most Important City* (Atlantic Books: London, 2024)**.

ASSIGNMENT INFO

The final grade and the grant of 6 ECTS will be composed of the following aspects. A percentage weighting is established for each component:

1. **Active participation** in seminar discussions and during excursions, as well as posting comments on the readings/viewings on Moodle before each session (**30%**).
2. **Group presentation**, initiating a seminar discussion (**30%**).
3. **"Off the Beaten Track" illustrated essay** (**40%**).

A minimum of 80% class attendance is required. Failure to fulfil one of the mentioned components results in failure of the class.

1. Active Participation & Moodle Comments (30%)

- Verbal contributions in seminar discussions must reflect an awareness of the session's assigned readings/viewings.
- Before each class (at least one hour before class), students must post a written comment (approximately 100–150 words) on Moodle, beginning from Session 3.
- These Moodle comments should not summarize the readings but instead highlight aspects that you found remarkable, controversial, or worthy of further discussion.
- The use of AI is not allowed for writing these comments, as students must read the entire texts by themselves and formulate their own perspectives based on the information provided. Language and style are not graded.
- The written comments provide an opportunity for students who may feel less comfortable speaking in class.

2. Group Presentation (30%)

- Presentations should be 10 to 15 minutes long (depending on group size) and should end by initiating a discussion in a seminar or during a site visit.
- AI may be used for visual aspects of the presentation, but any text must first be written without AI assistance. Students may use AI for editing afterwards.
- Every presentation must include a very brief acknowledgment of consulted sources and any use of AI.

3. "Off the Beaten Track" Illustrated Essay (40%)

- The essay (for BA students 1,500 to 2,000 words; for MA students 2,500 to 3,000 words; both excluding bibliography) should focus on a lesser-known historic site that illustrates one or more aspects of Berlin's history.
- The essay is to be submitted by Monday, February 2, 5pm.
- Students must consult the lecturer during the semester to agree on a topic.
- The essay must show an awareness of and connect to the discussions we had in class (e.g. a case study for a debate we covered).
- Possible topics may include:
 - A historic building or small museum
 - An abandoned space that attracts urban explorers (no trespassing!)
 - A historical site with few remaining physical traces or no formal memorialization
- The essay must include original photographs taken by the student. Photo quality is not graded, but images should effectively illustrate the student's perspective and exploration. Students may also include self-made film clips.
- The essay must contain properly referenced sources, a bibliography, and a statement on AI usage.

AI may be used for brainstorming ideas and for improving language, style and structure at the very end. Other than that, AI is not allowed for documenting your personal exploration and connecting your findings to class discussions, as AI is of limited benefit in these areas.

YOUR INSTRUCTOR

Roland Pietsch has over twenty years of experience in teaching for, coordinating and directing international student programs, primarily at New York University Berlin and Queen Mary University of London. A native Berliner, Roland grew up in divided Cold-War-Berlin, a place that now feels strange and distant, often astonishing him as much as it does the students on the field trips. Roland holds an M.A. in history and economics from TU Berlin, and a PhD in history from Queen Mary University of London. His research focuses on the history of youth and sailors; he has published widely on these subjects, the latest publication being a study on youth in war and conflict for Bloomsbury's *Cultural History of Youth in the Age of Enlightenment* (2023). He has also worked as a historian for a variety of television documentary formats, such as the BBC's *Who Do You Think You Are?* series.

COURSE SCHEDULE

A detailed course schedule will be shared with you shortly before the start of the semester. If you, or your home university advisor, need more detailed information about the themes covered beforehand, please do not hesitate to write to the lecturer on roland.pietsch@hu-berlin.de.

The course and its syllabus are subject to change. Last update January 2026.