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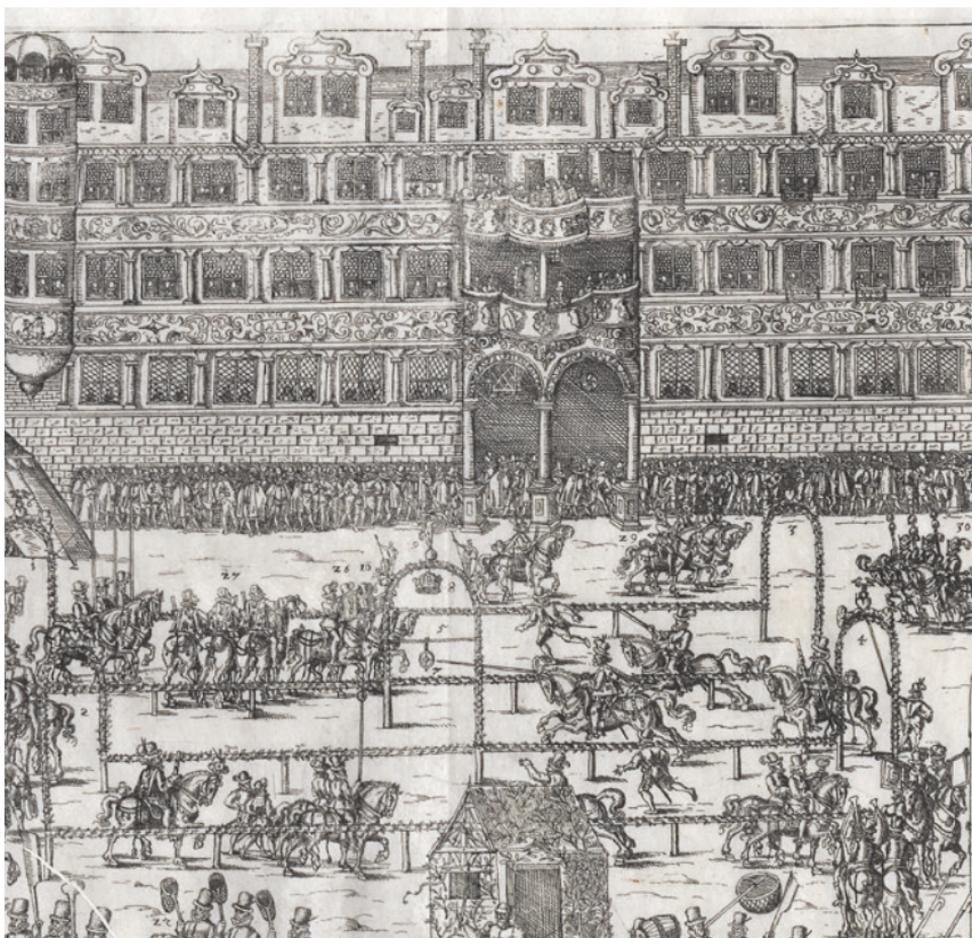
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The double city of Berlin-Cölln c. 1450



Ring jousting in front of the prince-electors' palace 1593



## Building Politics – 800 Years Summarized

Judith Prokasky

The site on the island in the river Spree where the Humboldt Forum now stands is a very special place. For centuries it has served as a stage and a political symbol for monarchs and politicians alike, frequently provoking opposition. It is this contrast between political power and social criticism that runs like a thread through the history of the site.

Back in 1250 <sup>↳ p.23</sup> this process was still a long way off. Whereas Cöln (Cologne) on the Rhine was already a city of 40 000 inhabitants, Cölln on the Spree was still something of a modest backwater. The thinly populated margravate of Brandenburg was on the uttermost fringes of the Roman-German Empire and had adopted Christianity relatively late. It was not until the late thirteenth century that Dominican friars founded a monastery on an island in the middle of the Spree, a sign that the small trading town was gaining in significance and starting to flourish, along with Berlin on the opposite bank of the river. But major political decisions and events continued to take place elsewhere, and the inhabitants of the double city of Berlin–Cölln still felt like free citizens.

Change came when the Roman-German emperor appointed an ambitious burgrave from far-off Nuremberg as prince-electoral and margrave of Brandenburg. When the Hohenzollern family chose Cölln as their new seat of power, they coerced the donation of an appropriate plot of land. In 1443 building work began on the edge of the city, directly adjacent to the Dominican monastery. Although the new building brought lucrative contracts for many tradesmen, most of the inhabitants were less than thrilled about the new authority installing itself right in front of their noses. In what became known as the “Berliner Unwillen” (Berlin Displeasure), they rebelled, laying waste to the chancellery and opening the weirs, thereby flooding the building site. Change came nonetheless: the prince-electoral consolidated his power and completed his new residence in 1451 <sup>↳ p.24</sup>.

In the following period the Hohenzollerns made the Palace their main residence. However, the neighbouring Dominican monastery posed an obstacle both to their plans for the expansion of the Palace and to their sovereign claim to power. The prince-electoral had the monastery dissolved and the monastery church converted into an imposing court and cathedral church with a royal burial place for the ruling family and the aristocracy.

The first view of the Palace dates from 1593. It shows a festive tournament taking place in front of the newly built south facade. By then, the royal household had grown to encompass around 500 people. A travelling merchant reported that the members of the court ate off silver plates and that paintings by the famous artist Lucas Cranach the Elder hung on the wall – but that only a few of the Palace’s forty rooms were fit for princes.

A rally in front of the Kaiser's palace 1918



A parade of the FDJ (Free German Youth association) on Marx-Engels-Platz 1964



would be victorious. Yet four years later he fled revolution and military defeat into exile. At the very same place where the Kaiser had once addressed the people, the social revolutionary Karl Liebknecht proclaimed the "Free Socialist Republic of Germany" on 9 November 1918. But ultimately it was the more moderate Weimar Republic that prevailed.

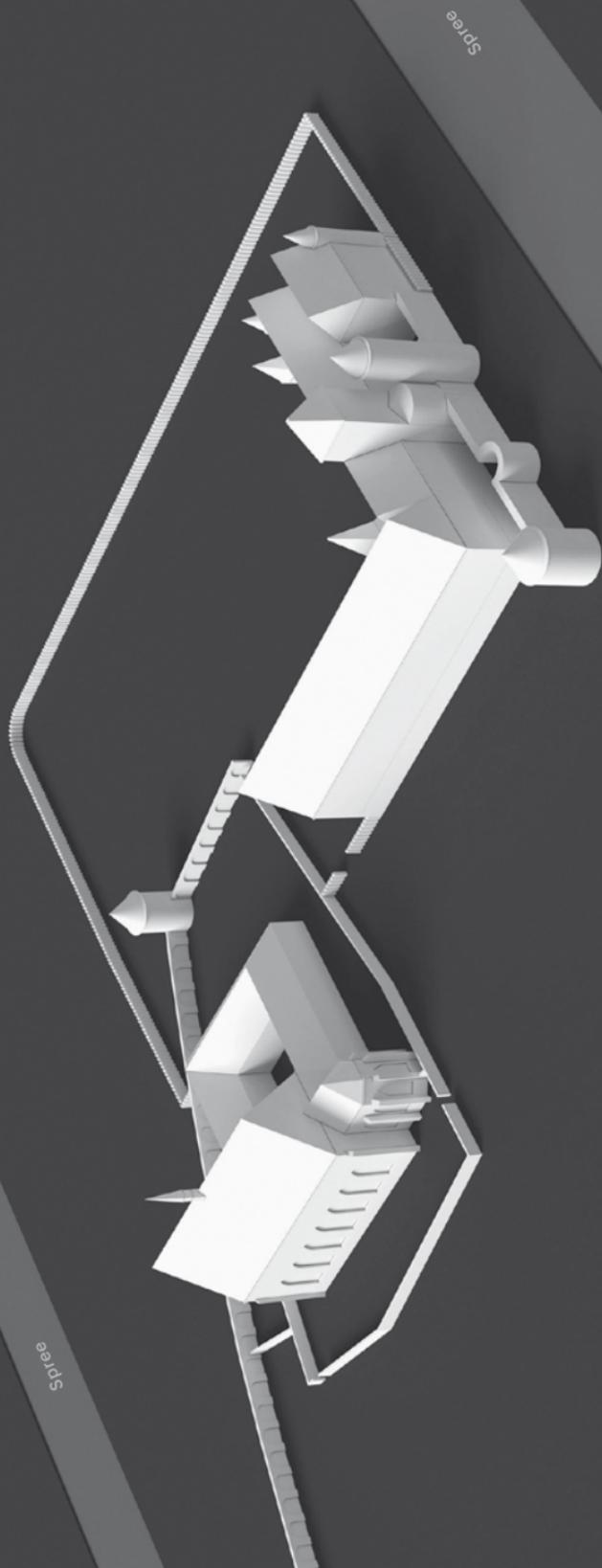
The Palace lost its function as the seat of the monarch, and the president of the new German Reich rejected it as his seat. In the end the Prussian assembly decided that the building would house academic, charitable and cultural institutions, and museums. The Hohenzollerns' former living quarters proved highly popular when opened to the public as the Historical Apartments. The writer Kurt Tucholsky made fun of this, declaring: "At night the spirit of the monarchy wafts through the desolate corridors. And during the day? During the day it rules."

The Lustgarten, once a setting for the monarchy to flaunt its regal grandeur, now became a venue for both left- and right-wing groups and parties. The Nazis held their first big Berlin rally here in 1932. After they seized power, they used the Palace as an effective backdrop for large-scale events: it was here, for example, that the Olympic flame was lit in 1936. The Palace continued to house museums, institutes and societies and on the surface remained largely unchanged. But for many of its employees the Nazi regime meant exclusion, persecution and murder.

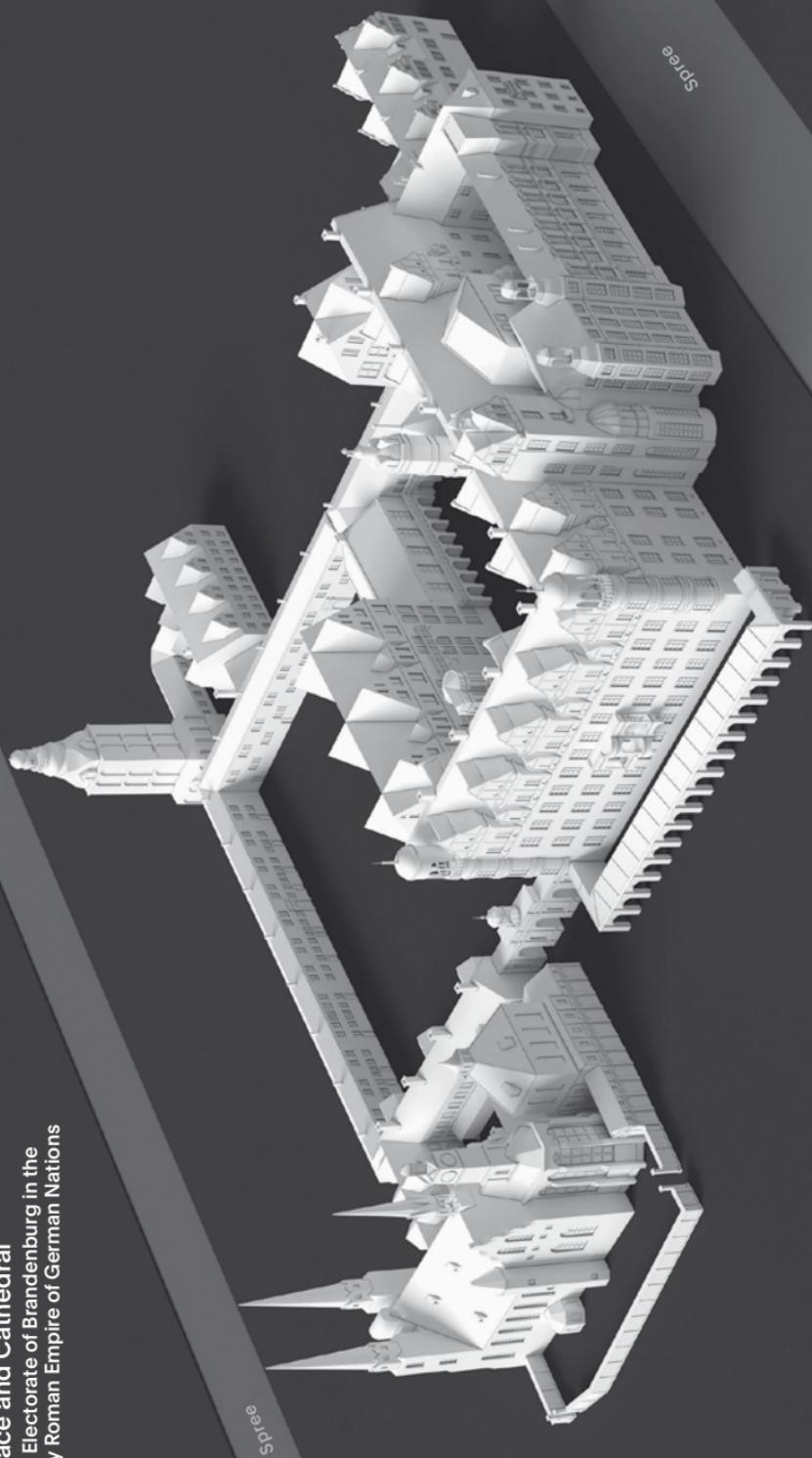
World War II, which the German Reich started in 1939 as an offensive characterized by conquest and extermination, spelled the beginning of the end for the Palace. Shortly before the war ended, bombs destroyed large sections of the building in February 1945 <sup>↳ p.28</sup>. The Nazi regime of terror left behind a ruin, which lay in the Soviet sector after Germany was divided into four zones of occupation. It also left behind a society yearning for security and a better future.

Initially, many people placed great hopes in the new German Democratic Republic (GDR, more commonly known as East Germany). But it rapidly became a party dictatorship controlled by the Soviets. In 1950, party chairman Walter Ulbricht, intent on having a central parading ground like the one in Moscow, ordered the demolition of the Palace ruins <sup>↳ p.29</sup>, albeit in the face of fierce resistance from various quarters, including several of his close associates. A scholarly working group was given the task of documenting the building prior to its demolition and salvaging parts of it; it was a hopeless assignment for which there was far too little time. By 1 May 1951, the site had been cleared in order to serve in its new guise as Marx-Engels-Platz, providing the venue for the first state-organized mass demonstrations. It was not until the years 1962 to 1964 that

1451 **Palace and Dominican monastery**  
The Electorate of Brandenburg  
in the Holy Roman Empire



**1685 Palace and Cathedral**  
The Electorate of Brandenburg in the  
Holy Roman Empire of German Nations



This section of the exhibition offers an introduction to the site's history, which spans more than 800 years. Over the course of fourteen minutes, a twenty-seven-metre-wide panoramic video screen presents a collage of still images and films showing the buildings that once stood on the site as well as their uses and important events that took place here. The collage shows that the site served for centuries as a prestigious, symbolically charged and often controversial centre of power. Princes and politicians tore down, converted and rebuilt structures in order to express their political ambitions and visions. The design of the exhibition room too, with its raw concrete walls, alludes to the fact that the site has always been a work in progress in the service of power. One special feature is the display case with the silver model of a ship. This object is one of thirty-five Flashbacks which, scattered throughout the Humboldt Forum, recall important aspects of the site's history.

# HISTORY OF THE SITE





Details of Baroque decoration appear like precious jewels against a midnight blue background. The collage gives an idea of the former magnificence of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (synthesis of the arts) that was the Berlin Palace. Its sources include colour slides from the famous Rittersaal (Knights' Hall), a masterpiece by Andreas Schlüter. They were taken in 1943 as part of a photographic documentation of significant artistic monuments that were increasingly jeopardized by World War II – a conflict which had been started by the German Reich. These were the only colour photographs of the Rittersaal, which was irrevocably destroyed soon afterwards.

## Baroque



## Appropriated

Electoral Friedrich Wilhelm cared so much about the Cabinet of Curiosities that he installed it close to his apartments in the Palace. After the losses of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), he had restarted the collection, which comprised mechanical instruments, antiquities, precious objects and works of art, many of them from outside Europe. Scholars and high-ranking guests of the elector were permitted to view the objects, which included natural objects and weapons from Japan, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, Chinese and Japanese porcelain, and Indian manuscripts. Friedrich Wilhelm acquired many of these items from merchants working for the Dutch East India Company in Amsterdam. Under his rule, Brandenburg also made its first attempt to establish colonial bases of its own. In 1680, the prince-electoral sent two ships to Africa to find suitable locations for a trading station – while also asking the members of the expedition to keep their eyes open for objects to add to the Cabinet of Curiosities and to acquire six adolescent African boys for the Berlin Court. Referred to as “court Moors”, they were considered a status symbol by Europe's princes. To celebrate the return of the first of the ships from its successful mission, the prince-electoral struck the commemorative “Guinea Ducat” and immediately founded a Brandenburgian fleet that set sail back to Africa. The Brandenburgians built Fort Gross-Friedrichsburg (today Princes Town) on the West African coast in what is modern Ghana.

Along with gold and ivory, people were the most profitable “commodity” for the European colonists. The Brandenburgian trading stations participated in the lucrative slave trade, which primarily catered on a grand scale to the needs of plantation owners in America. The Africans who served at the Brandenburg court and in the military came to Berlin as spoils of war, as gifts from princes or via European trade. In the eighteenth century, about thirty to forty African men and women lived at the Prussian court, and there were still African musicians in the Prussian army at the end of the Hohenzollern monarchy in 1918. By then, the electoral and royal Cabinet of Curiosities had long been merged with the collections of Berlin's universities and museums. Moreover, Germany's interest in undiscovered worlds, which had often gone hand in hand with violence, was now associated with the imperialist colonial policies of the German Empire.





1932 Sheet iron and enamel 35 × 35 cm

This notice dates from the 1930s, when the Palace was accessible to the public at large. Since the end of the monarchy in 1918 the Palace had been given over to many different occupants, some of them institutions, like the Kunstgewerbemuseum (museum of decorative arts), others private tenants. All those who lived, worked or visited here had to find their way through the Palace, which had well over a thousand rooms and a multitude of entrances, staircases, mezzanine floors and corridors. This official notice of the national postal service Deutsche Reichspost showed the way to a public telephone.

Notice (public telephone)



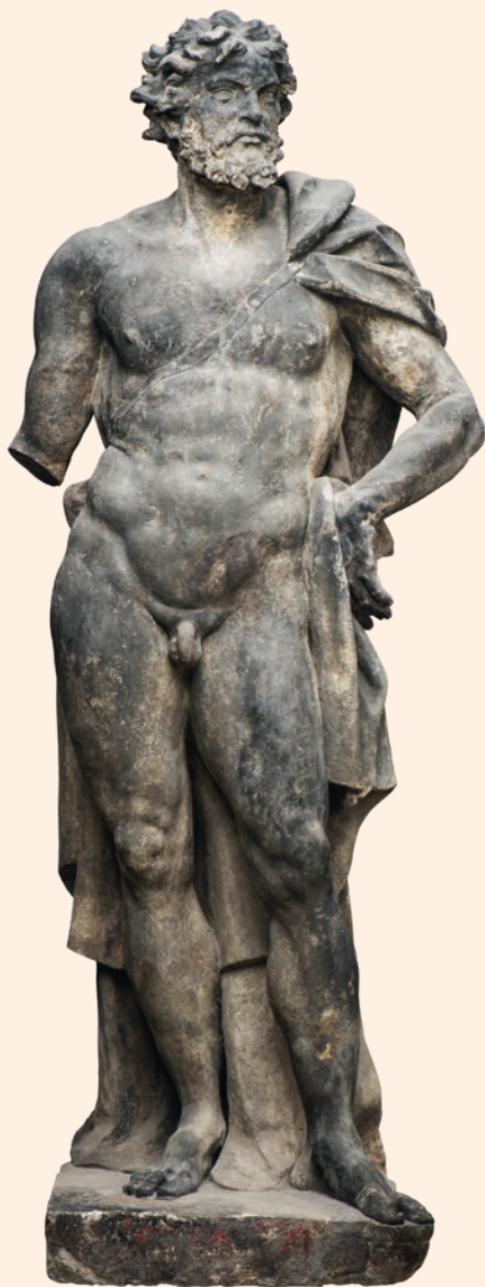


1894 Cast-iron, sheet steel and bronze Ø 150 × 90 and 100 × 50 cm

◀ The ventilator belonged to a low-pressure steam heating system which the technophiliac Kaiser Wilhelm II installed in the “White Hall” in 1894. Stoked with coal, this modern heating system supplied not only warmth, but – thanks to the ventilators – fresh air as well. The heating system installed by his grandfather fifty years earlier had allowed soot to enter the hall along with the hot air. Thanks to the new system, guests no longer found their clothing grimy after leaving the hall.

## Ventilator





c.1706 Sandstone 300×90×90 cm

The figure of Jupiter – sometimes also identified as the sea god Neptune – is one of six surviving colossal male figures that once adorned the central gateway of the Kleiner Schlosshof (small palace courtyard). Larger-than-life sculptures of ancient heroes and gods as finials on monumental columns were allusions to the triumphal arches of Roman architecture: a rather boastful gesture in the palace architecture of the time that reflected the Hohenzollern dynasty's aspirations to regal status. Andreas Schlüter probably created the models for the sculptures himself and supervised their execution by his workshop's sculptors.

**Gateway figure: Jupiter**





1975 Böttger stoneware, porcelain and gold 326 × 523 × 40 cm

Two wall reliefs made of porcelain decorated the large restaurant in the Palace of the Republic. The Meissen porcelain manufacturing company had been founded by the Saxonian prince-electors in 1710, but in the East German era it was a publicly owned enterprise with designs produced by a design collective. The artists used magnificent patterns and colours, for just like its palatial predecessor the Palace of the Republic had the purpose of promoting a certain image and impressing guests from Germany and abroad. That was certainly the case here, thanks in no small part to the majestic view from the restaurant's extended window front over to the Lustgarten (pleasure garden).

### Wall relief



## Revolutionized

It is often claimed that Germans do not make for great revolutionaries. As the saying goes, before storming a train station they would purchase a platform ticket. It is certainly true that the Germans are not all that radical when it comes to their revolutions. In contrast to the British, the French or the Russians, for example, they have never committed regicide. Quite the opposite, in fact: Kaiser Wilhelm II, who fled into Dutch exile after Germany's defeat in 1918, was sent his carefully packed possessions by the waggon-load.

It was from here that the monarch ruled the country. At the same time, this place is a key point of reference in Germany's democracy, for it was on the site of today's Humboldt Forum that citizens rose up against an authoritarian king in March 1848. During the fighting, 270 were killed, and many of the dead were laid out in a Palace courtyard, where Friedrich Wilhelm IV bowed before them. As the funeral procession passed by the Palace on the day they were buried, the king was once again forced to pay public homage to the fallen. These moments are considered milestones, even though several more decades and a world war would pass before the monarchy was swept away.

A new line of revolutionary tradition began with the November Revolution of 1918, which brought an end to the house of Hohenzollern after around 500 years of rule. On 9 November 1918, Karl Liebknecht proclaimed the "free socialist Republic of Germany" from the gate of the Palace. The Weimar Republic would ultimately look back upon the Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann's nearly simultaneous proclamation of a republic at the Reichstag as its founding moment. Nevertheless, Liebknecht had created an iconic moment at the Berlin Palace that would go down in history.

Just over forty years later, the Soviet Union founded the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as a single-party dictatorship, whose ruling elites declared the social revolutionary Liebknecht a national hero. The GDR, so the subtext, was to complete his work. But what had sounded like a promising future after the Nazi reign of terror was never to be. Calls for democracy, justice and freedom grew and then culminated in the "peaceful revolution" in the autumn of 1989. Where the Berlin Palace had once dominated the city centre, the Palace of the Republic now stood. This was where celebrations marking the fortieth anniversary of the GDR were in progress at the same time as people demonstrating outside were forcibly dispelled. What an irony that the party leaders came together with foreign dignitaries to sing "The Internationale", which in its German version includes the line "Let us sweep away the oppressor!" Only a few weeks later their rule would come to an end.