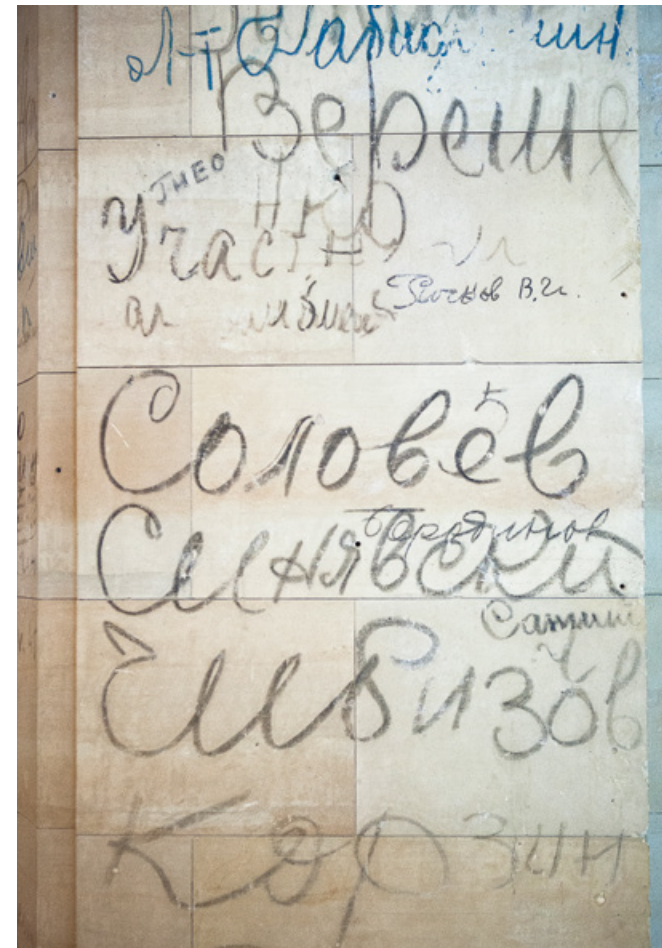


Graffiti written in Cyrillic on the walls of the Reichstag building in 1945 by Red Army soldiers were uncovered when the building was converted to house the new plenary chamber of the German Bundestag. Immediately after Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapping of the Reichstag building, architect Sir Norman Foster (b. 1935) began to remove its inner covering of gypsum fibreboard and asbestos. Paul Baumgarten (1900–1984), the first architect to remodel the building, in the 1960s, had installed the sheets of fibreboard in front of the walls of the original nineteenth-century structure by Paul Wallot, concealing historical evidence behind new interior surfaces. In an act of what Foster has termed 'civic vandalism', Baumgarten had also destroyed the original architectural decoration in many places and removed all traces

of history from the walls. By an irony of history, some nineteenth-century decoration and some traces of the battle that raged around the Reichstag building in April 1945 survived precisely because they were hidden by the fibreboard. They included the graffiti written by Soviet soldiers.

In the final days of the war, during the Battle of Berlin, the Reichstag building was the scene of particularly fierce fighting. At times, rooms at the bottom were still occupied by German troops, while areas higher up had already been taken by the Red Army. Not until 30 April 1945 did Red Army units succeed in hoisting the Soviet flag over the building. For Russians, a photograph by Yevgeny Khaldei of the flag being raised on the

roof has become an iconic image: it forms part of their collective memory of the 'great war for the fatherland', even though it was staged by Khaldei a few days after the event and retouched by him several times. Over the following days Soviet soldiers flocked to the occupied Reichstag building, which for them embodied their victory over Hitler's Germany. They took symbolic possession of the building by writing their name and where they came from in coloured crayon or charcoal on the inside and outside walls. Straight from the heart they expressed their joy in survival and their overwhelming sense of triumph, and they heaped abuse on Hitler. As people have done for thousands of years, they left behind a mark of self-affirmation, a sign of their presence in the world.



Over two hundred graffiti came to light when Sir Norman Foster removed the 1960s cladding from the walls. They had covered much larger surfaces originally – as far up the inside and outside as the soldiers could reach, sitting on the shoulders of their comrades or clambering onto balustrades. The surviving graffiti were cleaned and conserved under the supervision of Berlin's head of conservation (the Landeskonservator) and

in consultation with the Bundestag's Building Committee and Art Council. Foster incorporated these 'imprints of the past', as he called them, in the interior design of the remodelled building: he framed them with areas of plaster, like frescoes, and separated the modern plaster from the historical masonry by a deep groove in order to mark the gap in time. In this way, he pointed up the contrast between the writing as a spontaneous reaction to a moment in history on the part of individual people and the seemingly timeless, archaic monumentality of the stone walls.

Art at the German Bundestag Cyrillic graffiti



Further information:
Tel. +49 (0)30-227-32027 or
kunst-raum@bundestag.de
www.kunst-im-bundestag.de

Published by: German Bundestag, Secretariat of the Art Council, Platz der Republik 1, 11011 Berlin, Germany **Written and conceived by:** Andreas Kaernbach, Curator of the Art Collection of the German Bundestag **Translated by:** Language Service of the German Bundestag, in cooperation with Michael Foster **Designed by:** büro uebele visuelle kommunikation, Stuttgart (Nadja Schoch) **Printed by:** MEDIALIS Offsetdruck GmbH, Berlin **Photographs by:** DBT/Julia Nowak, Berlin (details), RIA Novosti. Reproduction (soldiers on the stairs), bpk/Voller Ernst – Fotoagentur/Yevgeny Khaldei (soldier writing on the wall)

Inspection of the graffiti revealed that the vast majority consisted of the formula ‘... was here’ (Russ. ‘здесь был’), followed by the date or the name of the soldier’s hometown or region, his rank, the route taken by his troops or the military unit to which he belonged. A few contained abuse or politically motivated remarks, such as ‘Gornin was here and spat’ and ‘They’ve paid the price for Leningrad’. Others indicate that the writers had confused the Reichstag building with the Reich Chancellery: ‘We were in the Reichstag, in Hitler’s den! Captain Koklyushkin [,] Senior Lieutenant Krasnikov, J. 15/V 45’. Some soldiers recorded pride in their military prowess: ‘Glory to the pontoon builders, who conquered the Spree and its canals. We were in the Reichstag [,] 6.5.45 [,] Ivanov and Tchikhlin’. One touching graffiti shows a heart pierced by

an arrow accompanied by the words ‘Anatoli and Galina’. The hometowns and regions reflect the ethnic and political diversity of the peoples from the Soviet Union who made up the Red Army. ‘Todorov V.I.’ and ‘Todovrov V.’, for example, state that they came from the Donbass, while ‘Shevchenko’ is ‘from Ukraine’. Others reveal ‘Marched Teheran – Baku – Berlin’ or name their home as the Caucasus, Yerevan or Novosibirsk.

In view of the large number of graffiti it is scarcely surprising that some of their originators can still be identified decades later. Anar Nayafov, a student from Azerbaijan on an internship with a member of the Bundestag, discovered a graffiti written by his grandfather Mamed Nayafov. Veterans Pavel Zolotaryov and Professor Boris Sapunov, both from St Petersburg, actually found the graffiti they had written over half a century earlier. A tour guide tells of a similar experience: ‘A group of veterans’ wives from what was then Stalingrad examined the graffiti. After the tour an elderly woman from the group came up to me and told me that her deceased husband said he’d been here and had also immortalised himself. Tears flowed when the old woman eventually stood in front of her husband’s written testimony.’

The Cyrillic graffiti are thus more than pieces of historical evidence. As deeply human tokens, they bring history to life and deliver the recording of major events into the hands of those who experienced them at first hand and who often enough were forced to suffer from them.



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