

Preprint

Jan Gypfel, *Tempo! Berliner Verkehrsgeschichte* [Tempo! Berlin Transport History] (Berlin, Elsengold-Verlag, 2015); 208 pp., €29,95, ISBN 978-3944594385

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From late nineteenth century onwards there is a constant flow of publications dealing with Berlin's regional or local history. Partly this flow is of a scientific or scholarly nature, partly it is aimed at a broader audience than just academics, be it tourists or the Berliners themselves in search of information about their – often new – homeland. The recently founded publishing house, *Elsengold* (named after the gilded statue on top of Berlin's famous Victory Column), is devoted to the second branch of local history. Whilst it produces large-sized books with many pictures, which do not engage with scholarly questions or use scholarly apparatus, they do not necessarily have shallowness of content.

This is what Jan Gypfel's historical outline of the transport systems in Berlin is like, too. The author, a journalist, presents a plain but detailed chronological history, starting in the Middle Ages and ending in 2015. During the Second Empire, Berlin – until then a second-rate city compared to London and Paris – became a boom town of new industries, the "Chicago of Europe" as Mark Twain put it. These developments included the introduction of modern transport systems. In 1881 the world's first electric tramway started operating, and in 1902 the subway (later the *U-Bahn*) – which for financial and technical reasons was mostly elevated initially – opened its gates. Both innovations came about by the initiative of Werner and Wilhelm von Siemens. However, mention in the book of the protagonists of this early subway project, like Heinrich Schwieger, Paul Wittig and Paul Francke, is missing (an all the more noticeable omission since the latter is my great, great grandfather). This is a characteristic of the whole book: Gypfel tends to forego actors and instead focusses on technical aspects.

In the 1920s Berlin introduced another hypermodern transport system, the *S-Bahn*, the first electrical rapid transit railway. Surprisingly, the author deals with this innovation only briefly and, again, does not mention the main actors involved and their motivations (perhaps because the book was co-financed by the Berlin Transport Works, the BVG, responsible for bus, tram, subway and ferries, but not the *S-Bahn*). When after the Second World War Berlin was divided, it lost its position as an exemplary "smart city" for public transport. It took decades to regain its pre-war status (many *S-Bahn* train units from the 1930s were still in use at the turn of the millennium). Instead, both halves of the city adopted the concept of being a "car-friendly city" (*autogerechte Stadt*): East-Berlin opted for broad avenues in the Soviet style and West-Berlin for a system of urban freeways in the American style. After the reunification in 1990 – which happened at a time when the motorcar was becoming the archenemy in the "green" mainstream of urban planning – Berlin did a rather good job in integrating its two transport systems, even though the tram remains a sign of being in the Eastern boroughs, as do the freeways in the Western ones.

This history is well researched, written professionally and illustrated brilliantly. Admittedly, it lacks footnotes and an index, and more than once I got the feeling that the author knows more than he was allowed to include. Nonetheless, this sort of coffee-table book provides for interesting reading and invites readers to scroll through the pages. Moreover, since the “facts” were gathered so thoroughly and presented so colourfully, Gympel’s overview may serve well as a textbook for secondary schools and proseminars.

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