The Reichstag building has a turbulent history. It was built at the end of the 19th century for the German Reichstag. Today it is the seat of the German Bundestag.

Selected photos and documents tell the story of the building from its origins to the present day.

The exhibition takes you further, to other sites of German parliamentary history in Berlin, Weimar and Bonn. It also informs you about suffrage and the role assigned to Parliament in the various constitutions of Germany since 1871.

*Further information on the history of parliamentarianism in Germany can be discovered in the German Bundestag’s exhibition “Milestones – Setbacks – Sidetracks” in the Deutscher Dom at Gendarmenmarkt, here in Berlin.*
Meeting venues
The Parliament meets in the former Royal Porcelain Manufactory from autumn 1871 (top left).
In 1884 Emperor William I lays the foundation stone for the Reichstag building (bottom left).
His grandson Emperor William II inaugurates it in December 1894 (top right).
The Reichstag now has its own building (bottom right).

Parliamentary beer evening
Although Imperial Chancellor Otto von Bismarck takes a sceptical view of Parliament, he occasionally seeks conversation with the Members.

Inscription
In 1916, in the midst of the First World War, the words Dem Deutschen Volke (To the German people) are inscribed on the Reichstag building.
The initial enthusiasm for the war has been replaced by war weariness and protests.
The First World War ends in 1918 with the defeat of Germany.

Constitution of the German Empire
"We William, by the Grace of God": on 16 April 1871 Emperor William I issues the constitution of the German Empire.
The Reichstag can influence legislation and approves the Empire's budget.
The Imperial Chancellor does not answer to Parliament, but solely to the Emperor.

The right to vote
Men aged 25 and over are entitled to vote. The women of the Empire cannot take part in Reichstag elections, nor can soldiers in active military service and people receiving paupers' assistance from public funds.

"Kulturkampf"
In this 1875 caricature Bismarck and Pope Pius IX are depicted playing a game of chess.
The political background is the conflict between the Empire and the Catholic Church. Bismarck is also keen to reduce the political influence of the Catholic Centre Party.

Social legislation
Material hardship and poor working conditions lead to repeated protests and strikes.
At the initiative of Imperial Chancellor Bismarck the Reichstag passes several social security laws in the 1880s.
These social policy measures are also intended to reduce the social democratic voter base.

The First World War
This notice announces the outbreak of war. Decisions must now be taken in the Reichstag regarding the granting of war credits.

A political truce
At the outset of war in 1914, Emperor William II calls for national cohesion and loyalty. The parties initially assure him of their support.

The Weimar Republic
The founding of the Empire on 18 January 1871 marks the birth of the first German nation-state. The Reichstag becomes its parliament.
In 1884 construction begins on the new parliament building designed by German architect Paul Wallot. From 1894 Members meet in the Reichstag building. Here, imperial laws are debated and adopted. The Bundesrat and the Emperor must approve laws.
The First World War starts in August 1914. The monarchy in Germany comes to an end in 1918 following the military defeat of the empire.
1918 – 1933

anarchy

1918 – 1919

The Reichstag during the Weimar Republic

02 Weimarer Republik
1918 – 1933

Germany becomes a parliamentary democracy
Members draft a constitution in W
Away from the unrest in Berlin, the elected
Friedrich Ebert gives the opening speech.
Assembly meets in the Weimar National Theatre.

dominate Members’ work in the years that follow.
The consequences of war and financial crises
From 1920 the Reichstag meets in Berlin.

Myths and burdens
The Treaty conditions, such as the high reparations
in 1919 against the Treaty of Versailles (bottom).

Right-wing parties blame democratic forces
to be paid, weigh heavily on the Republic.
The National Socialist Party (NSDAP) uses
effectively during its election campaign (top).
The “substitute Emperor”

As head of state he has extensive powers:
Reich President Paul von Hindenburg inspects
a military formation in 1925 after being sworn in.
The “substitute Emperor”

Under Hindenburg the extent of these powers
decrees and declare a state of emergency;
he can dissolve the Reichstag, issue emergency
as head of state he has extensive powers:

A distinctive feature of the Weimar Republic
Fragmentation
Due to the lack of an electoral threshold
is the fragmentation of the party landscape.
Extremist parties from the left and the right seek
to undermine democratic parliamentary order.

Street campaigning plays a major role
campaigns and street fights

Campaigns and street fights

Female parliamentarians from various parties
gather for a photo, including:

Marie-Elisabeth Lüders (back row, 2nd from right),
and Marie Juchacz (back row, 3rd from right),
founder of the Worker’s Welfare Committee.

The right to vote in general, equal, direct and
secret elections is introduced for women and men
aged 20 and over in the German Empire in 1918.

On 11 August 1919 Reich President Friedrich Ebert
adopts the constitution of the first German
parliamentary democracy on 31 July 1919.

The National Assembly meets in Weimar and
in the country towards the end of the war.
Uprisings and revolution have taken place
in the country at the end of the war.
On 9 November 1918 Philipp Scheidemann proclaims
Germany a republic from the Reichstag building.

The Weimar Constitution
Parliament is now responsible for legislation,
and members of the government sign the
Weimar Constitution

The Right

Socialism

样的，这样的

The Left

Germany’s first parliamentary democracy

Life and politics in the Weimar Republic are
shaped by strong ideological differences, social
assembly and freedom of belief and conscience.

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The Reichstag during National Socialism

1933 – 1945

Arson: on the night of 27/28 February 1933, fire ravages the Reichstag's plenary chamber. In March 1933 the Reichstag adopts Hitler's Enabling Act at the Kroll Opera House. Parliament thus deprives itself of its powers. The National Socialists destroy democracy: they rescind basic rights and establish a dictatorship led by Hitler. Terror and propaganda dominate politics and daily life in the "Third Reich". The National Socialists systematically persecute, arrest and murder millions of people. The Second World War unleashed by the German Reich claims over 50 million lives. It ends with the unconditional surrender of the Wehrmacht on 8 May 1945.

The Reichstag fire

The National Socialists blame political opponents for the fire in the Reichstag in February 1933. The actual course of events remains unclear.

Destruction

The plenary chamber is destroyed by the fire and is not reconstructed. Other parts of the building continue to be used, during the war as a hospital and maternity ward.

Sham parliament

After the fire Parliament meets in the Kroll Opera. It is here that the Enabling Act submitted by Adolf Hitler is passed on 24 March 1933. Parliamentary democracy is cast aside. The SPD unanimously rejects the law. Communist Members are excluded from the vote. The Reichstag is now a sham parliament.

Sham election

Voters no longer have a choice: with the introduction on 14 July 1933 of a law banning the creation of new political parties, the NSDAP becomes the sole party permitted in Germany.
Germany 1918 – 1933
Republic

1933 – 1945
Socialism
National

1945 – 1989
Monarchy

Divided Germany 1945 – 1989

The Federal Council, the German Reichstag and the German Federal Republic. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 is the birth of a new Germany. The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 initiates the political revolution in a divided Germany.

1945 – 1989

Berlin 1990

The Berlin Wall is dismantled

The Four Power Agreement of 1971

The Four Power Agreement of 1971 forbids plenary meetings of the German Reichstag at the 11th SED party conference in 1986.

A symbol of parliamentary democracy in the plenary chamber of the Bundeshaus in Bonn.

The Federal Eagle by sculptor Ludwig Gies displayed.

A parliamentary district is built by the River Rhine.

In Eastern Germany a socialist state in the Soviet mould is created in the form of the GDR.

Western occupation zones draft a constitution

Elections

The first Bundestag elections on 14 August 1949:

Citizens follow the meetings with great interest.

As President of the Parliamentary Council,


The founding of the Federal Republic of Germany on 23 May 1949.

The Parliamentary Council promulgates the Basic Law in 1949 in the shape of the Federal Republic.

The alliance of the Second World War victors – the USA, the UK, France and the Soviet Union – occasioned the Eastern occupation zones to draw up a draft constitution.

With a voter turnout of over 78 percent in free self-determination, it is also evident that the people approve of the new Basic Law.

‘The entire German people are called upon to achieve in free self-determination the unity and freedom of Germany.’

The preamble states that:

‘…the people of Germany call for the establishment of a democratic and united Germany free in the spirit of free self-determination.’

The Federal Republic of Germany. A parliamentary district is built by the River Rhine.

‘The German people of all nationalities and races have the right to form a democratic state in a united Germany free in the spirit of free self-determination.’

Germany's transparent democracy (bottom).

Glass panels and open-plan architecture symbolise the transfer to Berlin has already been decided.

The Bundestag meets temporarily in the main hall of the Pedagogical Academy in Bonn.

A new home yet the division of Germany continues.

location for the government headquarters,

The city of Bonn is intended only as a temporary. A parliamentary district is built by the River Rhine.

in the Federal Republic of Germany.

is the symbol of parliamentary democracy.

In reality power is held by the SED, the People’s Chamber is the supreme organ of the state.

Under the Constitution of the GDR of 7 October 1949 the People’s Chamber is the supreme organ of the state.

For the Federal Republic of Germany on 23 May 1949.

The Parliamentary Council promulgates the Basic Law in 1949 in the shape of the Federal Republic.

The Four Power Agreement of 1971

The Four Power Agreement of 1971 forbids plenary meetings of the German Reichstag at the 11th SED party conference in 1986.

Contemporary campaign posters

1971 People’s Chamber election in Karl-Marx-Stadt:

Votes cast openly at the first elections to the People's Chamber.

the history of Germany here until 1994.

Around 17 million visitors explore the exhibition “Questions on German History” using a voting booth is considered suspicious.

while the GDR constitution provides for secret voting, in Western Germany open voting is the rule.

The large chamber is used for cultural events and demonstrations (bottom).

The infrequent meetings of the GDR sham parliament,

The Four Power Agreement of 1971

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Promoting the image of socialism, as seen here at the 11th SED party conference in 1986.

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The preamble states that:
The People’s Chamber removes the SED’s claim to leadership from the GDR constitution on 1 December 1989. Various parties are now able to stand in the first democratic elections on 18 March 1990. The result of the first and only free elections to the People’s Chamber of the GDR is also a vote for reunification.

President of the People’s Chamber of the GDR Sabine Bergmann-Pohl informs Bundestag President Rita Süssmuth of the accession decision of 23 August 1990.

On 31 August 1990 representatives of both German governments sign the treaty on the “Establishment of German Unity.”

Excerpt from a speech manuscript: on 28 November 1989 Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl presents the Bundestag in Bonn with his “Ten-point programme for ending the division of Germany and Europe.”

The Peaceful Revolution in the GDR encouraged by political reforms in other communist states in Eastern Europe, resistance against the dictatorship also grows in the GDR. Throughout the country people gather together for peace prayers and public protest. They call for freedom and democracy. Many people are arrested. Faced with huge numbers of peaceful demonstrators, the state authorities ultimately surrender. The Wall falls on the evening of 9 November 1989.

The British, French and American representatives of the Four-Powers conference in Potsdam accept the contract on “Establishment of German Unity” on 31 August 1990. The road to reunification is clear.
Decision on the capital

Meeting place
The German Bundestag meets in the new plenary chamber in Bonn from autumn 1992 until its move to Berlin in 1999.

Taking the oath
On 1 July 1994 Roman Herzog is sworn in at the Reichstag building in Berlin following his election as Federal President by the Federal Convention.

Reichstag dome
Architect Norman Foster presents Bundestag President Rita Süssmuth with his designs for a glass dome to be constructed at the express wish of the Bundestag's Members.

Handover of the key
On 19 April 1999 Bundestag President Wolfgang Thierse receives the key for the new seat of Parliament.

On the night of 2 / 3 October 1990 thousands of people joyfully celebrate German reunification in front of the Reichstag building. In December 1990 Germans elect a parliament for their reunified country. In 1991 the German Bundestag votes to move its seat to Berlin. In the summer of 1995 the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrap the Reichstag building. Reconstruction of the building follows, according to plans by British architect Norman Foster. A glass dome on top of the Reichstag building becomes an eye-catching visitor attraction. The Bundestag commences work in Berlin in 1999, with the Reichstag building as its seat once more.
The German Bundestag today

1999 – today

The Reichstag building is a magnet for visitors. More than one hundred years since its construction, it is a place of vibrant parliamentary democracy. Located in the centre of Berlin, it attracts millions of visitors every year.

The Bundestag is the heart of German democracy. It is here that Members discuss bills, vote, consult experts and question ministers. A large part of parliamentary work is done in the plenary chamber.

Daily life

In the plenary chamber, journalists can observe the work of the Members. Voting in the plenary chamber is by show of hands, not electronic voting cards (top) or division of the assembly.

Consulting experts and questioning ministers is one of the everyday tasks of Members of the Bundestag. It is here that Members discuss bills and monitor the Federal Government. Article 42 of the Basic Law states: "Members of the Bundestag shall have the right to consult experts and question ministers.

The Reichstag building is the focal point of Berlin’s cityscape. The reflection and prayer room in the Reichstag building is a place of retreat and contemplation. The Jakob Kaiser, Paul Löbe and Rot 2000, 875/99 modern building complexes named after significant parliamentarians: the Federal Government.

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“From the Reichstag to the Bundestag” – An exhibition by the German Bundestag

Concept: Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Foundation, Bonn

Design: Büro für Gestaltung Wangler und Abele, Munich

Translated by: Language Service of the German Bundestag

Coordination: German Bundestag Research Services,
Research Section WD 1 – History, Contemporary History and Politics

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The exhibition is located on the roof terrace of the Reichstag building and can be visited free of charge. However, registration in advance is required.