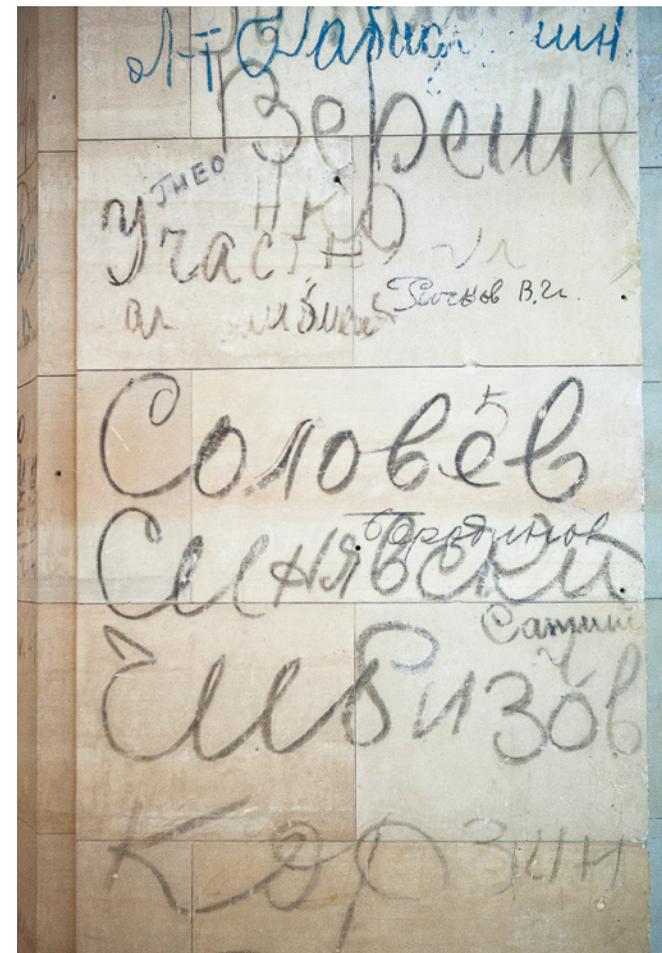


Graffiti written in Cyrillic on the walls of the Reichstag building by Red Army soldiers in 1945 were uncovered when the building was converted to house the new plenary chamber of the German Bundestag. During the first half of 1995, the British architect Norman Foster (b. 1935) began to remove its inner covering of plasterboard and asbestos. Paul Baumgarten (1900–1984), the architect who first remodelled the building in the 1960s, had installed the plasterboard in front of the walls of the original building, concealing historical evidence behind new interior surfaces. In an act of what Foster has termed ‘civic vandalism’, Baumgarten had also destroyed much of the original architectural decoration and removed all traces of history from the walls. By an irony of history, some of the original decoration dating back to Wallot’s time and traces of the battle that

raged around the Reichstag building in April 1945 survived precisely because they were hidden behind the plasterboard. They included the graffiti left by Soviet soldiers.

In the final days of the Battle of Berlin, the Reichstag building was the scene of particularly fierce fighting. At times, rooms in the lower part of the building were still occupied by German troops, while rooms higher up had already been taken by the Red Army. Not until 30 April 1945 did Red Army units succeed in raising the Soviet flag over the building. For Russians, Yevgeny Khaldei’s photograph of the flag being raised on the Reichstag has become an

iconic image and forms part of their culture of remembrance of the ‘Great Patriotic War’. In fact, 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 Reichstag building, which for them embodied the victory over Hitler’s Germany. They took symbolic possession of the building by writing their names and where they came from in coloured chalk or charred wood on the inside and outside walls. Straight from the heart, they expressed their joy at having survived and their sense of triumph at the victory in Berlin, 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.



Many more graffiti came to light when Norman Foster removed the 1960s cladding from the walls. They had covered much larger interior and exterior surfaces originally—as far up as the soldiers could reach, sitting on their comrades’ shoulders or clamoring onto balustrades. The surviving graffiti were cleaned and preserved under the supervision of Berlin’s Head of Conservation (Landeskonservator) and in consultation with the Bundestag’s Building Committee and Art Council

and the Russian Embassy. 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, a shadow gap, in order to mark the leap in time. In this way, he pointed out the contrast between the writing as a spontaneous reaction to a moment in history on the part of individual people and the seemingly timeless, almost archaic monumentality of the stone walls. Inspection of the graffiti revealed that the vast majority consisted of the phrase ‘... was here’ (the Russian words ‘здесь был’), followed by the name, the date or a reference to the soldier’s

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
Written and devised by: Andreas Kaernbach, Curator of the Art Collection of the German Bundestag
Translated by: Language Service of the German Bundestag, in cooperation with Hillary Crowe
Designed by: büro uebele visuelle kommunikation, Stuttgart
Photographs: DBT/Julia Nowak, Berlin (details), akg-images (soldiers on the stairs), akg-images/Voller Ernst/Khaldei (soldier writing on the wall)
With thanks to: Karin Felix, Berlin

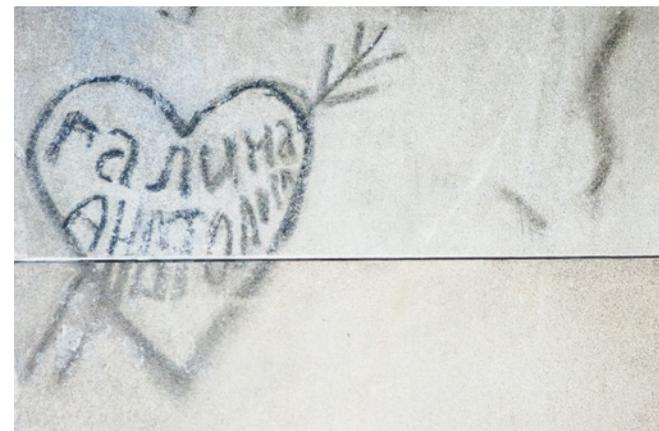
home town or region, his rank, the route taken by his troops, or the military unit to which he belonged. A few contained abuse or politically motivated remarks, such as 'They've paid the price for Leningrad!' (followed by the name 'Stetchishin') or 'Gunin was here and spat'. Others indicate that the writers had confused the Reichstag building with the Reich Chancellery: 'We were in the Reichstag, in Hitler's lair! 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 sketch shows a heart pierced by an arrow accompanied by the words 'Anatoli and Galina'. The hometowns and regions reflect the ethnic diversity of the peoples from the Soviet Union who made up the Red Army. 'Todorov V.I.', for example, states that he 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 not surprising that some of their originators can still be identified decades later. Anar Nadzhafov, a student from Azerbaijan on an internship with a Member of the Bundestag, discovered a graffiti written by his grandfather Mamed Nadzhafov. Veterans Pavel Zolotarevsky and Professor Boris Viktorovich Sapunov, both from St Petersburg, actually rediscovered the graffiti they themselves had written over half a century earlier. A tour guide tells of a similar experience with a group of women from Ukraine, survivors of a concentration camp, who saw the graffiti: 'After the tour, an elderly woman from the group came up to me and told me that her late husband said he'd been here and had left his mark for posterity. Tears flowed when

the elderly lady found herself standing in front of her husband's hand-written testimony.'

The Cyrillic graffiti are thus more than pieces of historical evidence. As a deeply human record, they bring history to life and give the task of documenting great moments back to those who experienced them first-hand and who often endured untold suffering as involuntary witnesses.



Art at the German Bundestag Cyrillic graffiti

