

The Berlin Airport Debacle (September 5, 2016)

Abstract

Grandiose plans for an international air hub outside of the new capital Berlin fizzled since political mismanagement of the project failed to meet the required safety standards, thereby postponing the opening by a decade and gratifying its many critics.

Source

Ten Years of the BER Debacle

It has been ten years! That is how long work has dragged on since the groundbreaking ceremony for Berlin's new airport project. Estimated costs have almost tripled since then. And the infamous megaproject will remain a construction site for some time to come.

Do you remember 2006? The iPhone did not exist yet, Jürgen Klinsmann was the manager of the German team at the Soccer World Cup and Barack Obama was still the senator from Illinois. It was a long, long time ago. On a late summer day in 2006, a group of men in dark suits thrust their spades into the sandy soil on the outskirts of Berlin. This marked the start of construction for what was to be "the most modern airport in Europe." Champagne flowed amidst the giddy atmosphere. "This is a happy day for the region," announced the jubilant Klaus Wowereit, Berlin's mayor at the time. He should have had another look around, as the hangover would be massive.

Since then, construction on the third-largest airport in Germany has already taken twice as long as those responsible had thought at the time. The prestige project had been scheduled to go into operation in 2011. But what does "construction" really mean here? At times, building would go ahead, only to be torn down later. Sometimes work would proceed furiously, and then hardly at all. This has been constantly accompanied by political intrigues, open conflict, and severe anguish. A series of cancelled opening dates has turned the Berlin-Brandenburg Willy Brandt Airport into a symbol for political pipe dreams and naivety, a lack of planning, and immense waste. This is represented by three letters: BER – the aviation location abbreviation for Berlin.

Cost factors, laughingstock, political controversy

Many have laughed about BER, shaken their heads in disbelief—or both—upon hearing stories such as these: a gigantic mess of cables in the terminal, escalators that are a few steps too short, improperly planted trees, unlocatable rooms, and lights that can't be turned off. The officially stated costs for the airport since the start of construction have risen from two billion to 5.4 billion euros, which is only partly due to extensions on the project.

The BER has dented Germany's reputation as an engineering nation. Wowereit could no longer remain in office on account of the debacle, and it severely undermined the political credibility of Brandenburg's Prime Minister Matthias Platzeck. In the space of three years, four airport managers have come and gone. Then there is Hartmut Mehdorn, one of the men with spades back in 2006, whose career path has been astonishingly intertwined with the airport project. Back in 2006, he headed the Deutsche Bahn, which would operate the train station under the terminal. He later managed Air Berlin, the largest client of Berlin's airports. Finally, he was named head of the airport operating company.

"One is always wiser in hindsight," says Michael Müller, looking back on the failed crisis management in

Schönefeld. He is the current mayor of Berlin as well as being chairman of the airport's supervisory board of the airport. "With what we know today, it was a mistake to dismiss the general planners from the airport," Müller admitted in an interview with the German press agency dpa, referring to a decision by his predecessor, Klaus Wowereit. "As a result, we practically had to start from scratch in 2012."

Who still believes in the schedule?

It has only been about a year now since there has once again been an overview of the construction site and a reasonably clear plan on how it could still be transformed into a functioning airport. Yet, airport chief Karsten Mühlenfeld and his right-hand man Jörg Marks are repeatedly confronted with legacy issues, such as the unsolved problem of the ventilation system between the terminal and the underground train station that fails to eliminate smoke in the case of fire. "There is still a chance of opening in 2017," says Mühlenfeld, half-heartedly affirming the current opening schedule.

Important permits, however, are still lacking. Observers expect a degree of certainty following the Berlin state elections in October, in which Mayor Müller hopes to hang onto his post. But it is quite possible that the seemingly endless story of Berlin's airport will continue for some time to come.

Source: Burkhard Fraune, "Zehn Jahre BER-Debakel," *Deutsche Welle*, September 5, 2016, <http://p.dw.com/p/1Js0R>

Recommended Citation: The Berlin Airport Debacle (September 5, 2016), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-5329>> [July 07, 2025].