

# The Great Berlin Industrial Exhibition (1896)

## Abstract

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The Great Industrial Exhibition of Berlin in 1896 was a vast, multifaceted exposition modeled on the great World's Fairs. After the sensational success of London's Crystal Palace in 1851, later expositions, such as Paris in 1867, or Paris in 1888, or Chicago in 1893, were each larger, grander, and more expensive than the those that came before. Though it is less well-known today, the Berlin Industrial Exhibition [*Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung*—sometimes translated as Berlin *Trade* Exhibition] was modeled on this grand tradition. Sited in Treptower Park, work on the Berlin Industrial exhibition began in 1894, and involved the construction of dozens of huge buildings, the creation of a massive artificial lake at the center, and even the installation of an electric tramway (a cutting-edge technology) to circle the exhibition grounds. It was the largest exhibition to be staged in Germany for a century, until the Hanover World Expo of 2000.

Notable features of the Berlin Industrial Exhibition of 1896 included a giant 27" telescope, a panorama of the North Pole ("with live polar bears, walruses, and Eskimos"), a dramatic panorama of the Alps, and a huge number of restaurants, cafés, and other temples to consumables that ranged from chocolate to cigarettes. Exhibition halls were filled with the manufactures of the textile, metal, chemical, porcelain, paper, and book industries. Photography equipment, displayed by companies such as AGFA, was showcased alongside incubators for premature newborns that had been developed in Berlin's hospitals. There was also a naval exhibition, on which scale-model battleships maneuvered and engaged in mock sea battles—in a time in which German battleship-building began to gain steam.

Several ancillary exhibitions were directly adjacent to the Industrial Exhibition. These included the German Colonial Exhibition (a semi-official showcasing of Germany's colonies in Africa and the Pacific); "Alt-Berlin" (a historical recreation of the old town); and the Special Exhibition "Kairo," which reconstructed a street in ancient Cairo, included a mosque and, most dramatically, a reconstructed pyramid. Both the Colonial Exhibition and the Kairo Special-Exhibition included shows of "natives," including Duala (from the German colony of Southwest Africa, present-day Cameroon) and New Guineans in the Colonial Exhibition, and Egyptians and Somali horsemen in the Kairo exhibit. Finally, there was an adjacent amusement park that included booths and rides, including hot air balloon rides that offered stunning aerial views of the whole grounds.

The exhibition sought to showcase Berlin as a "*Weltstadt*"—a world capital—by highlighting the strengths of its industry and economy, and at the same time, by presenting itself as a focal point of the world though juxtaposition against other cultures. Many commentators also recognized the exhibition as a catalyst for modern consumer culture in imperial Germany. Meanwhile, in the globalizing world, Berlin's great exhibition was both a deliberately-crafted declaration of German power, but also a recognition of the importance of the gaze of those other nations upon Germany—whether that gaze was one of admiration or skepticism.

This book, Paul Lindenberg's luxury-edition of a photograph album of the exhibition, was simultaneously a testament to the ambitions of the exhibition organizers, a glorious and self-congratulatory display of the exhibition itself, and—as a coffee-table book for purchase—a manifestation of the very consumer culture that it fueled.

## Source

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The carefully prepared work in Treptower Park is now complete – for years, the realization of the

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grandiose plan has been tirelessly worked and accomplished, the minds and hands of countless people have been indefatigably at work, the original idea has become ever more beautiful and brilliant, and now that it stands before us embodied in a captivating and imposing guise, we can say with justifiable pride that the work of the new German imperial city is worthy, that Berlin's industry and commerce, art and science have shown themselves worthy of their reputation and with this exhibition have created something whole, something great, which will always retain its place in the history of our city as a widely visible landmark!

Berlin has had to work hard to achieve its present, still much envied, but also much praised position on the world stage; only a few decades ago it was often ridiculed and even more often blasphemed, it was the little-noticed stepchild among the nascent other world cities and even the German residences. Berlin – it may have been synonymous with firmness and manliness, diligence and activity, but people generally looked down on the city located in the middle of the “Holy Roman Empire’s sandpit”<sup>[1]</sup> partly with arrogant irony, partly with a certain pity, they did not expect much from the future of the place, they visited it only if they had to, especially those from the southern provinces, and were happy when they could shake the dust of the unattractive city off their clothes again.

Berlin itself, of course, cared little about all the hatred and suspicion; it continued to work and create in silence, suspecting that the time would come when the eyes of the whole world would be upon it, when it would have to show with all its strength what it had learned with diligence and purpose, what it was capable of in the awareness of its ability, what it was accomplishing as a city of work and knowledge, of trade and change, which had made active progress under long peaceful rule, less noticed both externally and internally.

And the time came, the sixties and seventies came with their unimagined, tremendous political successes, the Prussian eagle took a bold, high flight, and when he returned home, he wore the shimmering imperial crown on his head and was allowed to spread his wings shieldingly over the newly united German people, over a great German fatherland inextricably bound together by iron and blood!

The former small fishing village had become the German imperial city. Almost overnight, new goals and new tasks had arisen, the city stretched out in all directions, its population doubled in size, desolate fields were transformed into densely populated parts of the city, what was outdated and rotten was torn down and rose gloriously anew. The old, somewhat narrow and threadbare Berlin, as we still see it in some of the illustrations in our book, disappeared more and more and made way for the new, shining city, which soon began to compete with its much older sisters on the Seine, the Thames and the Danube, beating them in many respects within a short time.

But it was not only outward appearances that were valued; the city was considerably elevated by a wealth of health-promoting facilities, by the founding of new educational institutions, by the promotion of art and science; trade and industry and commerce also kept pace and, in some cases, conquered the world market in a powerful manner. For a long time, the desire to show publicly what they were capable of, what they could achieve, what Berlin meant in this respect, had been growing louder and louder and the desire ever stronger, and so the plan for a major Berlin exhibition met with a loud and sympathetic response. There was certainly no lack of influential voices who would have liked to show on Berlin soil what the whole of Germany and other friendly states could achieve in the areas mentioned, but after careful consideration of all the factors involved, the decision was made to stage only a Berlin exhibition albeit with a broad definition of its geographical limits.

And now it has opened its doors to us, and we are filled with wonder and admiration at its colorful garb and rich contents. The following pages will tell you about both in detail. Today, however, we can already say that this exhibition has succeeded like few others, that it is surprising in its size and solidity and that it will serve as a spur and inspiration to future generations as a proud symbol of what Berlin was able to

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create at the end of the nineteenth century!

[...]

The financial basis of the exhibition is the guarantee fund of four and a half million marks, which was quickly raised in the form of one thousand marks in Berlin's commercial and industrial circles.

Our city administration made 350,000 marks available to the exhibition committee and approved six million marks indirectly related to the exhibition – paving roads leading to the exhibition, rebuilding bridges, building the pavilion of the city of Berlin and purchasing exhibits, etc. – just as the railroad spent 2½ million marks on expanding traffic for the exhibition and building a special station.

In addition, there was income from leases (fixed income and expected income) of 1,297,000 marks, poster rental income of 870,000 marks (excluding the profit from the sale of lots and plus the contribution of 300,000 marks from the city of Berlin). The contribution from the 1879 exhibition fund was 52,000 marks, so that in order to balance expenditure and income, a daily attendance (over 150 days) of around 50,000 people must be achieved; for the expenditure amounts to almost 6½ million marks, namely: Main building 1,559,000 marks, chemical building 290,000 marks, fishery building 322,000 marks, building for the school (welfare facilities) 132,000 marks, horticulture 15,000 marks, building for the gas industry 26,000 marks, administration building 78,000 marks, fencing 35,000 marks, decoration of the park 221,000 marks, bridging of paths 100,000 marks, Ponds and water tower 289,000 Mk, irrigation and drainage, gas and water pipes 250,000 Mk, architects, building office 200,000 Mk, land leases 75,000 Mk, subsidies (contributions to the Treptow and Rixdorf communities for paving, to the railroad administration for the construction of the railroad station, to the various groups and interior decorations) 510,000 Mk, advertising, posters, music 100,000 Mk., electric lighting and power: a) total costs of the electric lighting of the main industrial hall 215,000 Mk., b) the rest; machines and boiler foundations and brickwork, coal, water, service etc. 535,000 Mk. to 750,000 Mk, paths, gardens, fountains 160,000 Marks, various small buildings 87,000 Marks, boiler house and chimneys 60,000 Marks, insurance 80,000 Marks, staff etc. 300,000 Marks, restoration of the park 100,000 Marks, general and unforeseen items 110,000 Marks, in total 6,379,000 Marks.

But now, after this brief overview, join us on our visit to the exhibition site, let us see what has been created there in diligent work with tireless energy, let us take a close look at this great, brilliant work, which should and will bring glory, honor and advantage not only to Berlin, not only to our local home state, but to all of Germany!

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## NOTES

[1] A mocking nickname for the Mark Brandenburg based on its sandy soil.

Source of original German text: Paul Lindenberg, *Pracht-Album Photographischer Aufnahmen der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung 1896 und der Sehenswürdigkeiten Berlins und des Treptower Parks Alt-Berlin, Kolonial-Ausstellung, Kairo etc., Berlin, 1896*. Berlin, 1896. Available online at <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:kobv:co1-opus4-37820>

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