The Wertheim Department Store in Berlin (c. 1906)

Abstract

Built in 1896, the Wertheim department store on Leipziger Platz, designed by architect Alfred Messel (1853-1909), was among Europe's most famous commercial buildings. After a 1906 expansion, it was also among its largest: the store housed a spacious glass atrium, numerous elevators, and a staggering array of goods all under one roof. Company owner and retail magnate Georg Wertheim (1857-1939) could boast a luxurious consumer palace with unprecedented popular appeal.

As popular as they proved to be, Germany's big department stores also generated opposition, particularly from shopkeepers and other small retail merchants who felt threatened by the competition. Department stores were viewed by many as quintessential symbols of "modernity" and thus as irrefutable evidence of the rapid disappearance of traditional ways. Supporters welcomed this fact, pointing to Berlin's quick ascension to the status of a "world capital," its growing cosmopolitanism, and its commercial might. Detractors, on the other hand, bemoaned the advent of "mass" culture, growing anonymity, and "unfair" competition. Some of this opposition was also tinged by antisemitism, as many of the large stores were owned by Jews.

Wertheim's phenomenal success came to an abrupt end with the Nazis' rise to power. Between 1934 and 1939, his entire holdings were expropriated and transferred to "Aryans." On December 31, 1939, he died of pneumonia in Berlin. His crown jewel, the Wertheim department store, was destroyed by Allied bombing during World War II.

Source

Source: bpk-Bildagentur, image number 40008298. For rights inquiries, please contact Art Resource at requests@artres.com (North America) or bpk-Bildagentur at kontakt@bpk-bildagentur.de (for all

other countries).

bpk / Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin

Recommended Citation: The Wertheim Department Store in Berlin (c. 1906), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:image-2176> [September 12, 2026].