



Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918 Transportation in Berlin (1905)

Industrialization created waves of urbanization, swelling cities with ever more people, who had to be accommodated by ever-larger networks of transportation, infrastructure, and public administration. Up to this point, cities had been more or less divided along class lines, with the wealthy classes residing in particular neighborhoods and the poorer ones in others. The introduction of mass transportation, however, brought changes to the traditional organization of urban space, altering residential patterns. Nonetheless, certain distinctions still remained, especially those based on economic class. As the political and economic center of Germany, Berlin served as a magnet for all members of Wilhelmine society.

Everyone takes the streetcar in Berlin. Nothing would keep a person from riding it: not tax brackets, social prejudices, or even the middle-class rage that occasionally flares up against the hated corporation; only the nature of the neighborhood and, to some extent, the time of day, can reduce streetcar use among members of particular segments of the population who use particular cars. To this end, nothing is more instructive than spending an hour on one of the lines that run from the easternmost to the westernmost part of Greater Berlin. On such trips, the clientele assembled within the long, narrow, windowed car (complete with two carpeted benches) changes with unflinching regularity. Workers and plain women, sometimes with a child sitting on their laps in a red woolen cap – this is the crowd in the east. One sees no boys or girls. Fashionably dressed passengers attract glances when they board, and the conductor accepts the “sixer” given to him as a tip (always an exception in Berlin) with twice the astonishment here. The picture changes in the west: in the city center, businesspeople, ladies returning from shopping, and messengers from large department stores climb aboard. In the true West Berlin – the “New West” – such cars often double as grand street-facing buildings. Most of the passengers are ladies, nannies with infants, and schoolchildren in expensive yet simply designed clothes who stand in the center aisle and present their monthly tickets to the conductor. But on these lines, there are also nuances that vary according to neighborhood. The residents of Wilmersdorf and Schöneberg are middle class; the Charlottenburg families are rich, and the Grunewald residents are millionaires. The last group also boasts its own line (it bears the premier symbol A), and often, particularly on sunny winter mornings, one is treated to the following sight: a streetcar interior cozily warmed by heaters under one row of benches, the scent of Patchouli*, groups of the most elegant women laughing and conversing. [. . .] Passengers take this streetcar to Potsdamer Platz, where they get into a carriage.

The elevated railway, the subway, and the commuter train offer similar sights in the western half of Berlin; the two-class division all but guarantees this. The wide, spacious, first-class compartments of the commuter line, with their small, dainty connecting passageways on one side and sets of upholstered furniture, exude the air of a cozy study. Still, one cannot really enjoy

* An intense perfume.

this coziness in the morning and evening, when the compartments are perpetually overcrowded and the passengers without seats are more likely to stand on the toes of the seated than on their own. In Berlin, it is doubtless the commuter train that gives the strongest impression of a big-city atmosphere, when, for example, one stands at midnight under the huge, brightly lit barrel arch of the Friedrichstraße station and then boards a train full of revelers returning from a late night on the town. The subway is rather plain by comparison. Its cars, which are narrow and have low ceilings, are not divided into compartments but have benches on both sides. Nonetheless, the interior design is very modern and very smart – even in both classes. There are always many officers on board, since the line traces a graceful arc that takes it past the lower-class districts in the west, but for the most part one sees women. They seem to have discovered that the modern interior serves as a perfect backdrop for them; and whereas the residents of other large cities get spruced up for a city stroll, the residents of Berlin – this city of modesty and electricity – do so for a ride on the subway.

Compared to the subway, the Berlin carriage is a simple, unprepossessing, colorless affair that makes no claim to elegance, even though passengers pay five to ten times the price of a train fare. Yet for comfort and ultimately even speed, the carriage is much better than its reputation; and the love that all upright individuals feel for the taximeter has once again made carriages fashionable. Like the trust-inspiring white-varnished hats, the original black-varnished versions fell into disfavor and have recently disappeared altogether under a police order. The taximeter now enjoys a nearly autocratic reign. It eliminates arbitrary pricing, and only the luggage taximeter, customarily used on drives to and from the station, and the after-midnight surcharge might be grounds for an unpleasant surprise, despite the much-vaunted cheapness of Berlin carriages.

Source: [Unknown author] *Berlin und die Berliner. Leute. Dinge. Sitten. Winke. [Berlin and the Berliners. People. Things. Customs. Clues.]*. Karlsruhe: Bielefelds Verlag, 1905, pp. 466-71.

Original German text reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds. *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871-1914 [Source Materials on Everyday Life in Germany 1871-1914]*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, pp. 43-45.

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