

# The British Embassy

Palais Strousberg, at the heart of Berlin, was the headquarters of the British Embassy between the 1870s and 1930s. By the 1920s the Palais had become somewhat dark and cramped. This was partly due to the construction and expansion of other large buildings, such as the Hotel Adlon next door, which towered over the nineteenth-century Embassy architecture.

In 1920, Lady Helen D'Abernon accompanied her husband, the new British Ambassador to Germany, to live at the Embassy: the first inhabitants since the onset of World War I in 1914. Earlier, in England, Lady Helen had been linked to "The Souls", a salon of thinkers and writers that included Edith Wharton and Henry James. During the war, she had worked as a nurse anaesthetist.

Until 1926, the D'Abernons hosted many important dinners and parties. Their guests included the German President, leading ministers and other diplomats. Lady Helen kept a diary of her time in Berlin, in which she discussed the difficulties of bringing the building back to its former glory and the challenges of diplomacy as Germany faced the reality of making reparations for their role in the War.

The Embassy was vacated in 1939. After being damaged in the subsequent war, Palais Strousberg was demolished in the 1950s.



The British Embassy (Palais Strousberg), 1896.  
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**Read this extract from Helen D'Abernon's diary and discuss the questions.**

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After three months of being "At Home" every Saturday afternoon (from 4.30 to 7p.m.) it is a sky-scraping joy to have had to-day my last Jour [day] for this winter. Eighty or ninety people came, amongst them a good many Germans. Violet Bonham-Carter,\* who is staying with us, showed her usual acumen by steering instinctively towards the most pleasant and intelligent people. Besides the Lichnowskys, there came Prince and Princess Thurn and Taxis~ and others from social, professional, literary and official circles. Rather fortunately the French were conspicuously absent, for at the present time – since the occupation of the Ruhr – it is enough for a Frenchman to come into the room for all the Germans to line up, edge off and filter away, and the air becomes so charged on either side with suppressed hatred and spleen that the unfortunate maîtresse de maison [hostess] is in purgatory.

(March 7, 1923)

\* A British politician and diarist.

~ German nobles.

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### **Questions**

- 1. What do you think "being 'At Home'" means? How does D'Abernon feel about this?**
- 2. What are some of the tensions D'Abernon faces as a British Ambassador's wife and a member of the international diplomatic community?**
- 3. What do you know about embassies today? How do you think they compare with those in the 1920s?**

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**Extension: Imagine you're a visitor staying at the Berlin British Embassy in 1920. Write a diary entry describing an average day. (Hint: think about what the Embassy is like, who you might meet, what you might do, etc.)**

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