

The German Federal Government's Support of Independent Archives*

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Even today, nearly twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the East German Ministry for State Security (Stasi) remains omnipresent. Hardly a day passes without media reference to that East German secret police organization. Were one to take only a superficial approach to the history of East Germany (German Democratic Republic, or GDR), one could easily draw the conclusion that the Stasi held East Germany in a stranglehold for nearly forty years, with even high-ranking functionaries of East Germany's communist party (Socialist Unity Party of Germany, or SED) trembling at the Stasi's feet. Responsibility for this mistaken public perception rests, in the first instance, with the East German communist party and its political successors. These political parties have trivialized the history of this era, casting the Stasi as their scapegoat¹.

That said, the post-1989 approach to the documentary legacy of the so-called "workers' and farmers' state" is not entirely without blame for today's state of affairs. Whereas the 1990 Unification Treaty clarified how to dispose of the records of both state and local organizations and institutions, for legal reasons the question of how to manage the surviving documentation of that era remained unresolved until the establishment of a new entity – the Foundation Archive of the Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR – in 1992. As regards the documents of the East German state security service, however, yet another approach was taken. Although there could have been no doubt as to the proper legal jurisdiction of the German Federal Archives (and its counterparts at the state level), political will at that time led to the establishment, in 1991, of a separate archive with an indefinite life span. The aim of this special archive was to ensure each citizen's unfettered access to his or her Stasi file. This official policy led to the (surely unintended) consequence that the "Shield and Sword of the Party", the Stasi, was ascribed elevated importance vis-à-vis other centers of power within the former GDR.

As an almost tragic consequence of this decision, the question of how to safeguard the documentary record of East Germany's opposition was by comparison

* This article is an updated version of my presentation to the 2007 annual meeting of German archivists.

¹ S. Manfred Wilke, 'Wenn wir die Partei retten wollen, brauchen wir Schuldige', *Der erzwungene Wandel der SED in der Revolution 1989/90*, Interview with Wolfgang Berghofer, "Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung", 2007, p. 396-421.

neglected, and this despite the fact that an Enquete Commission of the German parliament – charged during the 1990s with the investigation of the East German past – had explicitly analyzed the situation of opposition archives. As Hans Michael Kloth has noted, “for the scholarly investigation of East German history in general, and for the investigation of the history of opposition to the SED dictatorship in particular, the testimonies offered by opposition leaders represent an indispensable resource. These records are the only authentic documentation of independent thought and actions conveyed to us from the time of the SED dictatorship. For this reason alone, they are of special historical value. In addition, they provide a vital corrective to the official documentation left to us by the SED state. Through their conservation and widest possible use, opposition archives offer the basis from which we can avoid for ensuing ages distortions of GDR history.”²

What needs to be kept in mind in this regard is the disproportionate volume of opposition to official GDR documentation. Because of the adverse conditions faced by the East German opposition³, the volume of extant materials most probably does not exceed the single-digit kilometer range. Kloth reached a similar conclusion, estimating that the volume of opposition materials was less than a full kilometer (in contrast to the approximately two hundred and forty kilometers of documentation preserved from East German state, party, and secret police offices)⁴. If relevant extant state and local archives are included in this total, the relationship of official to opposition documentation is still more lopsided.

In the aftermath of the peaceful revolution of 1989, the independent archives of the East German civil rights movement found themselves reliant upon the private commitment of individuals who, for the most part, had been active in the East German opposition. These individuals were repeatedly compelled to submit, to a diverse range of funders, project-specific requests for support; often enough, funds were only made available for brief periods of time. This process was further complicated by the fact that the individuals maintaining these new collections regarded their position as different from that of traditional archivists. In his expert report to the Enquete Commission, Kloth described the problem in the following terms: “the ‘opposition archives’ do not see themselves merely as suppliers of documents to researchers. Rather, they see themselves as part of a larger coming to terms with the communist past within society as a whole. Typically, in addition to making documents available to scholars, journalists, and others, these archivists

² Hans Michael Kloth, *Unabhängige Archive und Materialien der Bürgerbewegungen. Der Stand von Erfassung, Hebung, Sicherung und Erschließung von Oppositionsdokumenten*, in *Materialien der Enquete-Kommission 'Überwindung der Folgen der SED-Diktatur im Prozeß der deutschen Einheit' (13. Wahlperiode des Deutschen Bundestages)* (ed. by the German Bundestag), VI: *Gesamtdeutsche Formen der Erinnerung an die beiden deutschen Diktaturen und ihre Opfer – Archive*, Baden-Baden, 1999, p. 919-996 (921).

³ *Ibidem*, p. 925.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 921 f.

consider other objectives as a natural part of their mission. These activities include recording oral history testimony, political education, independent research, as well as counseling and lobbying on behalf of the victims of the communist regime. In certain instances, their work extends to the advancement of a political agenda as well.”⁵ Despite various efforts, the hope fostered at that time by the independent archives – that their initiatives would receive direct institutional support from the state – failed to materialize⁶.

Between 1992 and 1998, two Enquete Commissions of the German parliament investigated the origins, history, and consequences of the East German communist dictatorship; the second of these commissions recommended that the German parliament establish a federal foundation to reappraise the SED dictatorship. In accordance with the law passed on June 5, 1998, our Foundation was established to promote a complete reappraisal of the causes, history, and impact of dictatorship in the SBZ (Soviet zone of occupation) in Germany and the former East Germany. Our Foundation also seeks to testify to the injustice of the East German regime and commemorate its victims, to further the anti-totalitarian consensus within our society, and to strengthen democracy and German unity. According to the 1998 federal law, these aims shall be fulfilled in particular by means of project-specific advancement of social reconciliation initiatives, of private archives, as well as organizations representing victims of the dictatorship in the Soviet zone of occupation and in the GDR.⁷

In order to understand, at least in quantitative terms, our Foundation's support to archives, it is first necessary to describe briefly the Foundation's endowment and its funding areas. Each year, the Foundation provides 2.5 million € to a diverse range of projects. To date, more than eighteen million € have been devoted to personnel and material costs associated with these projects⁸.

The Foundation possesses an endowment of approximately seventy-five million €, some of which derives from assets of the former East German communist party. The interest earnings from this endowment cover only half of the Foundation's financial requirements. For this reason, the Foundation also receives annual support from the federal government.

The Foundation's specific funding emphases include:

1. General programs and events supporting historical education;

⁵ *Ibidem.* p. 930 f.

⁶ To learn more about the approach of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media to National Socialist and Communist memorial sites in Germany, see <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/16/098/1609875.pdf>.

⁷ *Errichtungsgesetz, Bundesgesetzblatt Jahrgang 1998 Teil I Nr. 33, ausgegeben zu Bonn am 12. Juni 1998*. The full text of the law and additional information concerning our Foundation are available at www.stiftung-aufarbeitung.de.

⁸ All sums cited herein are offered in euros to ease comparison.

II. Exhibitions, documentary films, multimedia, and other projects with public resonance;

III. Efforts supporting the collection, deposit, archiving, inventory, conservation, and indexing of documents, objects, and oral history – especially those sources testifying to resistance and opposition to the SED dictatorship, but also those sources which illustrate the structures and working methods of that dictatorship;

IV. Projects that disseminate insights drawn from historical sources in keeping with the Foundation's mission;

V. Drafting of educational publications, based on the best available scholarship, to support educational work, especially in schools, other educational institutions, as well as museums and historic sites;

VI. Co-financing of scholarly research, documentation, and publication projects, as well as scholarly gatherings and efforts to support the training of young scholars (such as the annual fellowship program administered by the Foundation);

VII. The placement of historical markers at sites of supra-regional importance⁹.

As described above (III.), support of independent archives established by the East German civil rights movement is one of the most important pillars of the Foundation's support program, but by no means the only one.

Besides competition among the many diverse applicants, one cannot deny the existence in the past of certain "atmospheric" tensions between applicants and funders. These tensions were not solely attributable to the different perspectives of the respective parties. Rather, the Foundation's legal obligation to maintain an archive of its own provoked anxiety, with the concern making the rounds that the Foundation would attempt to exploit the situation to the advantage of its own archive. However, as the last ten years have proven – and on this point I believe we have reached a consensus – this fear was unjustified. The following achievements serve to underscore this assessment.

As regards support to archives¹⁰, from 1998 to 2007 circa 3,660,000 € have been granted to independent archives. These funds were used to inventory collections, establish depots in keeping with archival standards, and publications. This figure equates to an annual outlay of nearly 370,000 €, or roughly 15% of the Foundation's annual funding budget. If one focuses on those activities central to any archive, such as safe storage and cataloguing, ignoring, at least for the moment, such "discretionary" activities as public relations, the Foundation's annual support during this period added up to circa 2,800,000 €, or 280,000 € per year. In other words, the majority of earmarked funds went to activities central to the work of any archive; that

⁹ More information on our funding guidelines is available at <http://www.stiftung-aufarbeitung.de/foerderung/projektfoerderung.php>.

¹⁰ Inventory projects involving museums are not included herein.

said, the need to engage in outreach has not been ignored. For several years now, the Foundation has strongly encouraged the archives it supports to communicate more extensively with the audiences they serve.

The largest recipients of the Foundation's archival support are: the Robert Havemann Society in Berlin¹¹ (recipient to date of 2,480,000 €), the Leipzig Archive of the Civil Rights Movement¹² (recipient to date of circa 596,000 €), the Environmental Library in Grosshennersdorf¹³ (recipient to date of circa 263,000 €), the Thuringian Archive of Contemporary History in Jena (recipient to date of circa 136,000 €), and the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Non-Violence and Civil Courage in Werdau (recipient to date of circa 60,000 €)¹⁴.

These figures tell only a small part of the story. The true value of the Foundation's support becomes clearer when one considers individual projects:

- Cataloguing of the Robert Havemann Archive and attendant outreach efforts

Project Executing Organization: Robert Havemann Society

Project support of approximately 500,000 € per year (funding period: 1998 to 2006)

Robert Havemann was one of the best known East German dissidents.

Sentenced to death by the People's Court established by Adolf Hitler, in 1964 Havemann was expelled from the SED because of critical statements he made in public. Havemann remained engaged in initiatives to create democratic socialism until his death in 1982. Havemann was also one of the founders of the independent movement for peace and civil rights in the former East Germany.

The Robert Havemann Collection (circa 4 linear meters) encompasses Havemann's official and personal correspondence. Covering the period 1930 to 1982, the files document his scientific activities, including his involvement with the Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes, the Humboldt University, and the East German Academy of Sciences. The formal collection consists of biographical documents, including notebooks, address books, and pocket diaries. It is worth noting that the formal collection is supplemented by two additional repositories: a second collection of accessioned materials on Robert Havemann, as well as a collection of photocopied documents from external archives (together, these two supplementary collections encompass roughly eight linear meters). This last group of files contains copies of

¹¹ www.robert-havemann-gesellschaft.de.

¹² www.archiv-buergerbewegung.de.

¹³ www.umweltbibliothek.org.

¹⁴ More detailed information is available to readers of our Foundation's annual reports, available online www.stiftung-aufarbeitung.de/die_stiftung/index.php and at our main office in Berlin.

Gestapo and People's Court records of proceedings against the resistance group, "European Union."¹⁵

- Preservation and cataloguing of tape recordings and documents from the Peace Seminar at Koenigswalde (1979-1990) and the Peace Prayers Werdau (1989), including a subsequent publication.

Project Executing Organization: Martin Luther King Center for Non-Violence and Civil Courage in Werdau

Annual project support: 36,850 € (funding period: 2003 and 2004)

In 1973, twenty-six young people held the first Christian Peace Seminar at Koenigswalde. There, the group discussed "Creating Peace Without War – What Commends It?" Since then, the peace seminars have taken place twice a year. During the early years, the question of military service, that is to say conscientious objection, was the primary focus of discussion. Later, topics such as ecological damage and justice became increasingly important. Social questions remain at the heart of the conversations to this day¹⁶.

In the context of our archival consultations, the Foundation determined that the Martin Luther King Jr. Center possessed audio tape recordings of past Peace Seminars. As some of the tapes were more than twenty years old (and subsequently virtually obsolete), we encouraged our colleagues to digitize the recordings. The project yielded not only a newly-accessioned collection devoted to the Peace Seminars at Koenigswalde, but also a book and CD describing the seminars' ministry¹⁷.

- Cataloguing of repositories concerning nature conservancy in the GDR

Project Executing Organization: Institute for Environmental History and Regional Development e.V., University of Applied Science, Neubrandenburg¹⁸

Annual project support: 83,040 € (funding period: 2006 to 2008)

This collection consists of donations from East German individuals, groups, and institutions active, either in a voluntary or professional capacity, in nature

¹⁵ Simone Hannemann, Robert Havemann und die Widerstandsgruppe 'Europäische Union', *Eine Darstellung der Ereignisse und deren Interpretation nach 1945*, Berlin, 2001; Werner Theuer, Robert Havemann, *Bibliographie*, Berlin 2007; Florian Havemann, *Havemann. Eine Behauptung*, Frankfurt on Main, 2007.

¹⁶ <http://www.friedensseminar.de>.

¹⁷ Raum für Güte und Gewissen, *Das Christliche Friedensseminar Königswalde im damaligen Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt/DDR 1973–1990* (ed. by the Martin-Luther-King-Zentrum für Gewaltfreiheit und Zivilcourage, Archiv der Bürgerbewegung Südwestsachsens e.V.), Werdau, 2004.

¹⁸ www.iugr.net.

conservation and environmental protection. The collection includes the papers of Kurt Kretschmann, the father of East German nature conservancy. Kretschmann invented the marker used to denote protected areas throughout Germany (the marker consists of a black, long-eared owl placed against a yellow background). The to-be accessioned materials consist of some ninety running meters of documents and additional eight running meters of related papers.

- Establishment of an archive devoted to literature suppressed during the GDR era¹⁹, founded by Professor Ines Geipel and Joachim Walther

Project Executing Organization: initially the Hannah Arendt Institute, Dresden, subsequently the German Authors' Circle (*Autorenkreis der Bundesrepublik*)

Annual project support: 316,000 €, including partial funding of a temporary exhibition (funding period: 2001 to 2004)

From 2001 to 2004, the Archive of Suppressed Literature in the GDR was brought together by Professor Ines Geipel and Joachim Walther.

The Archive of Suppressed Literature in the GDR houses the works of more than one hundred authors denied public access for thematic, formal-aesthetic, and ultimately political reasons. In more than a few instances, repression during the East German era was not limited to a ban on publications. As this archive documents, even those who penned a few critical poems were compelled to serve prison sentences of several months. The East German works included in this archive also bear testament to the existence of a broad artistic movement beyond East Germany's official literary canon. Since 2005, the Buechergilde Gutenberg publishing house has printed select texts from persecuted authors in a series entitled, "The Silent Library". These publications were made possible through the support of our Foundation²⁰. In February 2006, the exhibition "Literary Counterworlds" was opened to the public.

¹⁹ Matthias Buchholz, *Archivarbeit – (manchmal) mehr als nur Amnesieprävention. Das Beispiel 'Archiv unterdrückter Literatur in der DDR'*, in *Archive und Gedächtnis. Festschrift für Botho Brachmann* (ed. By Friedrich Beck, Eckart Henning et alii), Potsdam 2005, 369-379 and Ines Geipel and Joachim Walther, *Intellekt ohne Repräsentanz. Ein Arbeitsbericht über ein Archiv der Widerworte*. "Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat", 12 (2002), p. 29-34 and Ines Geipel and Joachim Walther, *Widerworte. Intellekt ohne Repräsentanz*. "MUT", No 420, 2002, p. 76-87.

²⁰ Titles published to date in *The Archive of Surpressed Litearture in the GDR* series include: Edeltraut Eckert, *Jahr ohne Frühling*, Frankfurt on Main, 2005; Radjo Monk, *Blende 89*, Frankfurt on Main, 2005; Heidemarie Härtl, *Puppe im Sommer*, Frankfurt on Main, 2005; Gabriele Stötzer, *Ich bin die Frau von gestern*, Frankfurt on Main, 2005; Ralf Günter Krolkiewicz, *Nirgends ein Feuer mehr*, Frankfurt on Main, 2006; Thomas Körner, *Das Grab des Novalis*, Frankfurt on Main, 2007; Henryk Bereska, *Kolberger Hefte*, Frankfurt on Main, 2007; Günter Ullmann, *Die Wiedergeburt der Sterne nach dem Feuerwerk*, Frankfurt on Main, 2008; Sylvia Kabus, *Weißer als Schnee*, Frankfurt on Main, 2008.

In the various initiatives it supports, the Foundation closely monitors implementation. To ensure grantees carry out their work with a high degree of professionalism, the Foundation has long offered training seminars and individual consultations to archivists.

Taken together, the Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship actively supports archives in three ways:

1.) the Foundation is a state archive which primarily houses materials not created by agencies of government;

2.) the foundation supports independent archives in the context of the GDR civil rights movement;

3.) the foundation offers archival consultation to independent archives documenting the contexts of the East German civil rights movement. In the event one of the archives supported by the Foundation were to face liquidation, the Foundation stands available as a catch basin for threatened collections.

Speaking more generally, the Foundation's support (and co-support) for select projects advances varied perspectives on Germany's second dictatorship. Just as the Gestapo was anything but a nasty gaffe in an otherwise ostensibly harmonic and peaceable National Socialist ethnic community, East Germany's Stasi was by no means the only stain on the allegedly "white vest" of what SED leaders once held up as "real existing socialism."

The Stasi faithfully served the SED for nearly forty years. In order to demonstrate how a peaceful revolution was possible in spite of "real existing" repression, we desperately need the archives of the East German civil rights movement. It is in the interest of society as a whole to ensure these cultural treasures (such as underground journals)²¹ are preserved and made available to future generations. Through the Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship, Germany's federal government is exercising this responsibility.

Translated from German by Keith R. Allen

²¹ Worthy of mention in this context is a digitization project supported by our Foundation and the German Research Foundation (DFG): www.ddr-samisdat.de.