A New Outlook for German Archives since the Reunification in 1990

HARTMUT WEBER
Bundesarchiv Postfach, 56064, Koblenz, Germany

In Germany archives have experienced a “miraculous Renaissance” in the intellectual discourse in the last view years as Ulrich Raulff asserts. The “Right of Veto” as to archival sources, based on fundamental methodical principles in historical research, has become subject to public discussions. In fact, many conflicts concerning questions of contemporary history have been initiated and renewed when looking at archival holdings. Hence, some biographies which were carefully construed were deconstructed and stripped of there fictional parts with the help of archives. The archives have gained new momentum with regard to looking back at and facing the development of recent German history, in particular the two German dictatorships. The archives can help to disclose injustice, unfair treatment and crimes in totalitarian regimes. Furthermore, within the framework of reparation, they can help to find prove for possible claims for personal and/or financial damage. The Culture of Remembering which makes it so much more important to have free access to open archives regarding the two totalitarian regimes in German history. Open archives allow a balanced view owing to the recent history and thus support and maintain basic democratic values.

The peaceful revolution of 1989 in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) leading to the German Reunification in fall 1990 after a short period of transition, has had a tremendous impact on archives in Germany. Only the most important of them can be described thereafter. In contrast to the federal structure of archives in the Western part of Germany, where apart from the Federal Archives the federal states “Länder”, the cities, communities and municipalities are responsible for the management and administration of their archives, the GDR had

1 Süddeutsche Zeitung, 16th May 2002
a tight centralised political system including the archives, ideologically indoctrinated by the Socialist Unity Party (SED) as the party of the state. The GDR archival system was, as pointed out by the former director of the Brandenburg state archives, a centralised system “par excellence”.³ The central archive administration under the Ministry of the Interior, mostly lead by non professionals, resulted in a severe regimentation concerning the Central State Archives in Potsdam and the directly subordinated regional archives. The policy of the political cadres in the archives was carefully planned by the central administration as well as the execution of professional, scientific and administrative tasks leading to restricted access to archives.

With the dissolution of the GDR government the central administration of the archives was also finished. The state archives of the former Länder dissolved in 1952, formerly integrated into the central state archives administration, saw a revival of their historical self-understanding after the reunification with the re-introduction of Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Pomerania, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia. The state archives of these new Länder have taken over independent archival functions in the federal structure of Germany after having been quickly provided with their own archival laws such as the corresponding archives of the Western part of Germany. They preserve the historical heritage of Brandenburg (Landeshauptarchiv in Potsdam), Mecklenburg-Pomerania (Landeshauptarchiv Schwerin and Vorpommernsches Landesarchiv Greifswald), Saxony (Hauptstaatsarchiv in Dresden and the Staatsarchives in Leipzig and Chemnitz), Saxony-Anhalt (Landeshauptarchiv Magdeburg and Landesarchive in Merseburg and Oranienbaum) and Thuringia (Hauptstaatsarchiv in Weimar and Staatsarchive in Altenburg, Gotha, Greiz, Meiningen and Rudolstadt).

The time of the Nazi-regime is not so well documented in the holdings of regional state archives, because the GDR Ministry of Intelligence “Staatsicherheit” (Stasi) withdrew this material in order to create a collection of Nazi-records for internal purposes. Nevertheless the number of accessible sources has largely grown for the research of the time before 1945, specially for doing research in archives concerning Jewish history or the history of the Third Reich which were hardly accessible before.⁴