

The GDR Opposition Archive

in the Robert Havemann Society

The GDR Opposition Archive in the Robert Havemann Society holds the largest accessible collection of testaments to the protest against the SED dictatorship. Some 750 linear metres of written material, 180,000 photos, 5,000 videos, 1,000 audio cassettes, original banners and objects from the years 1945 to 1990 all provide impressive evidence that there was always contradiction and resistance in East Germany. The collection forms a counterpoint and an important addition to the version of history presented by the former regime, particularly the Stasi files.

Originally emerging from the GDR's civil rights movement, the archive is now known beyond Germany itself. Enquiries come from all over Europe, the US, Canada, Australia and Korea. Hundreds of research papers, radio and TV programmes, films and exhibitions on the GDR have drawn on sources from the collection. Thus, the GDR Opposition Archive has made a key contribution to our understanding of the communist dictatorship.

Testimonials on opposition and resistance against the communist dictatorship

The GDR Opposition Archive is run by the Robert Havemann Society. It was founded 26 years ago, on 19 November 1990, by members and supporters of the New Forum group, including prominent GDR opposition figures such as Bärbel Bohley, Jens Reich, Sebastian Pflugbeil and Katja Havemann. To this day, the organisation aims to document the history of opposition and resistance in the GDR and to ensure it is not forgotten. The Robert Havemann Society has been funded entirely on a project basis since its foundation. Its most important funding institutions include the Berlin Commissioner for the Stasi Records and the Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship.

It was thanks to the founding members' dedication that the foundation for the present archive was laid in the offices of the Robert Havemann Society at Schliemannstraße 23, Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg in 1992. Initially, the archive consisted of the papers of the regime critic Robert Havemann, who passed away in 1982, and documents from the New Forum civil rights movement. Two important archives of the GDR opposition were later incorporated: the Matthias Domaschk Archive, founded in the East Berlin Environmental Library, and the GrauZone Archive, the only collection on the East German women's movement.

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The archive has been continually expanded, adding, for example, documents of early resistance in the Soviet-Occupied Zone and the young GDR. Well-known opposition activists such as Roland Jahn, Bärbel Bohley, Gerd and Ulrike Poppe, Marianne Birthler and Wolfgang Ullmann, as well as a large number of less prominent witnesses to the times have provided the archive with personal documents and testaments to their political activities. The collection also includes samizdat publications, posters, photos and flyers from the GDR civil rights movement.

Significance of the collection

The SED leadership aimed to prevent criticism and opposition by all means. The sources collected in the archive testify to the extent of repression against deviating attitudes, opinions and activities – yet they also show the courage and creativity of those who stood up to the state nonetheless. Without the archive, many opposition activists would be unknown to this day, and their courageous championing of self-determination, freedom and democracy would remain hidden.

The collection can be used to reconstruct the protests that the SED regime attempted to silence. Consequently, the testimonials of the GDR opposition are essential for our understanding of the events that led both to the Peaceful Revolution of 1989/90 and to German unity, prompting processes of change across Europe. Not least, they prove how important solidarity and support from the West were for the democratic movement in the GDR, in the time of divided Germany.

The Robert Havemann Society's political education work

The Robert Havemann Society collects, records and maintains the archive material and provides it for public use free of charge. The organisation also informs the public about opposition and resistance against the communist dictatorship in its own publications, exhibitions, projects, events and conventions. Examples include the multimedia project jugendopposition.de (recipient of a Grimme Online Award), the open-air exhibition "Peaceful Revolution 1989/90" on Berlin's Alexanderplatz (awarded the 2009 Unity Prize) and the Revolution Stelae, 18 memorial and information pillars calling attention to important sites of the Peaceful Revolution of 1989/90 around Berlin. In June 2016, the Robert Havemann Society launches the open-air exhibition "Revolution and the Fall of the Wall" at the Stasi headquarters in Berlin-Lichtenberg.

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