



The Public Libraries in West Berlin

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THE CITY OF WEST BERLIN is far better off with regard to the number of its public libraries than any other German city. However, the fast-growing use of these libraries has caused problems which were previously unknown. Much of the responsibility for these problems of the West Berlin libraries rests in past history; however, the State and society as a whole have done little so far to relieve the burden.

The present success achieved in West Berlin can hardly be explained without considering the particular political situation of the city. Berlin's status as a divided city sets the very problems in a special light, although similar problems do exist in all West German libraries. In addition, the libraries of West Berlin have to cope with the problems arising out of the conflicts within municipal government, a situation existing in almost any democratic system.

When the history of German libraries is examined, it can be seen that Berlin is not altogether a special case. Before World War I, library work in Berlin and in Germany as a whole was based on the concept of social instruction. The basic idea of the libraries was to provide books to needy persons who could not afford to purchase them; at the same time, it was expected that the level of education of the citizens would rise. On the other hand, nearly one hundred years ago the first news reached Berlin that public libraries in the United States neither tried to attract needy persons nor intended to serve their readers for only educational reasons. Such news undoubtedly staggered the naive self-confidence in the social-pedagogic metaphysics of the libraries. However, it has not yet been fully realized even in present-day Germany that the aim of a library is to satisfy the total needs of the readers for information of all types.

In the first stage of the development of a German library system,

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the highly complicated theory of the so-called "where-to-go" quarrel was often heard, with Berlin being the focal point of the battle field. The city is located half-way between Leipzig and Stettin, i.e., between the home ground of Walter Hofmann and Erwin Ackernecht, the prominent German figures who argued over the reason and purpose of a library. Berlin in the 1920's was the preferred residence of the highly educated *avant-garde*. It was a metropolis oriented toward moderate development and progress, and not at all the home of particularly narrow-minded groups. It was this international orientation plus the city's post-war occupation which finally gave the libraries of Berlin a promising start, after the city had gone through some years of recovery from the wounds it received in World War II.

The starting signal was given in 1954 with the establishment of the American Memorial Library by the United States of America. Today it is by far the largest public library in German speaking territory. The Library was a donation of the Americans to the Berliners. The building comprises 1,478 square meters (15,900 sq. ft.) of useable space and has approximately 300,000 volumes which were selected by Berlin librarians. So many visitors came on the opening day of the Library that the building had to be closed temporarily by police order. In the Library there was an atmosphere similar to that of a final summer sale, and thousands of Berliners could be seen leaving the Library with piles of books under their arms. There were, of course, some pessimistic voices; even librarians expressed fear that only sensationalism was leading the crowds to the library, and that the serious reader would be neglected by sacrificing quality for quantity. Fortunately, their fears proved to be wrong, and the library still circulates about 700,000 volumes annually, a far greater number than any library on the European continent.

The great success achieved by the American Memorial Library in Berlin made headlines in Germany's daily press, which libraries had not done previously. However, not the large crowd of readers but another happening became the decisive event for the improvement of German libraries. On March 31, 1955, the Parliament of Berlin passed a bill which had been in preparation for many years, and may be compared with what is known as a "library law" in the English-speaking world.

Cultural affairs in the twelve municipalities of West Berlin enjoy great independence, but their financial sponsorship is assured by the Senate of West Berlin. Thus the bill introduced may be called a finan-

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cial guarantee on the part of the legislature. This would have been impossible if the heavy use of the American Memorial Library had not proved that the Berliners' need for information was underestimated. Details of the ordinance and the results obtained since its introduction are published annually (since 1956) in *Berlins Öffentliche Büchereien (The Public Libraries of Berlin)*. An article printed in English features summaries of the Berlin Public Libraries Act.¹ The Act constitutes a ten-year plan, and the success achieved so far reveals that, from March 31, 1955, to December 31, 1963, the number of books circulated each year has almost doubled, i.e., it increased from 3.3 million to over 6.5 million volumes. This amounts to almost three books per capita.

The success becomes even more evident when one realizes that—to the knowledge of this author—there is no other city which has doubled the capacity and service of an established library system in so short a time. The above achievements may lead to the conclusion that the Berliner has a mania for reading books, far greater than other Germans. This, however, is not true. It is evident from the figures in Table 1 that the great success is based on the planned and organized extension of facilities and personnel.

TABLE 1

Comparative Data on West Berlin Public Libraries, 1955 and 1963

<i>Unit of Measure</i>	<i>May 1955</i>	<i>December 1963</i>
No. of libraries	65	99
Personnel (includes librarians)	352	736
Librarians	164	264
Book stock (volumes)	646,000	1,613,000
Expenditures per year:		
In Deutschemarks (DM)	5,896,000	17,131,000
In American dollars	1,592,000	4,625,000

There were thirty-four new libraries set up during the period indicated. In fact, however, an even greater number of libraries was established because the condition of some of the sixty-five libraries in existence in May 1955 did not justify their retention. In addition, in 1955 only twenty-four libraries featured open access, whereas at the end of 1963 only ten of the ninety-nine libraries still maintained closed access. Included in the ninety-nine libraries are four mobile units serving three suburban areas. The city library ordinance provided for a

considerable increase in staff. Until 1962 the pattern of staffing followed a formula based on the size of the book stock and the number of readers.

The almost one million books additionally acquired include paperbacks purchased in large numbers in recent years. The life of these books, however, is very limited and frequent replacements are necessary. These as well as other books taken out of circulation and replaced must be taken into consideration when the one million net increase is evaluated. It is interesting to note that the same experience of other countries also holds true for West Berlin; the modernization of libraries, for example, has brought about a change from closed access to open access. Non-fiction is increasingly in demand.

If the book circulation is divided into the annual expenditures, the cost of loaning a book amounted in 1955 to DM 1.79 and to DM 2.63 in 1963. However, the 47 per cent increase in cost parallels the increases in salaries, wages, materials, etc. In purchasing power, the costs of operating a public library in West Berlin neither increased nor decreased.

Books for the public libraries are selected by the Chief Librarian appointed in each municipality. He, in turn, lets the head of each library in his district make his own choices in most instances. Such a decentralization is primarily in the interest of the reader because only the on-the-spot librarian really knows what type of literature is requested by his readers. From an economic standpoint, however, the purchase of books through one central office might be more justified. If the office work involved were centralized and directed from one point, the necessary costs would be reduced considerably; making out an order for 120 copies of one title does not require more office work than ordering ten copies. There have been some attempts in the past to simplify the book ordering procedure, but no ideal solution has been found yet.

A foreign librarian visiting West Berlin will recognize some shortcomings in the library picture only after he has spent some time in the city. It will not take him very long, however, to notice from certain faults of sitting, and the ground plan of new buildings, that the various districts have failed to learn obvious lessons from each other and from the American Memorial Library. His first impression will be that the public libraries are open only a few hours daily and that there are no uniform opening hours throughout the city. Too short opening hours and inadequate reference stock undoubtedly prove that the most pur-

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poseful service to the public has not yet been fully accomplished in West Berlin. All the drawbacks mentioned would not exist today if the Berlin public libraries were directed from a centralized office. In practice, however, no authorized and responsible top management spans the entire library system; West Berlin in fact has twelve library systems which are only in loose contact with each other and with the American Memorial Library.

An amalgamation of the ninety-nine public libraries in West Berlin is not likely to come. Berlin is not a bibliopolis whose Utopian library system is described by the author in another paper.² It seems, however, feasible that a law might be introduced which would make the American Memorial Library the Berlin Central Library, with the municipal public libraries remaining autonomous to some degree. Such a library law should also make financial provision for the preparation and carrying out of a long-range plan for public library use.

References

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2. ———. "Festschrift für Friedrich Smend. Berlin, 1963, Seite 69 ff.