19TH ARCHIVAL SUMMER SEMINAR IN GERMANY


One of the longest-standing programs of the GHI, the Archival Summer Seminar, took place for the nineteenth time this year. From June 26 to July 8, 2011, a group of ten American Ph.D. students visited archives and research institutions and met with archivists and scholars in five German cities: Speyer, Cologne, Düsseldorf, Koblenz, and Leipzig. The aim of the seminar is to give doctoral students from the United States working on topics in the field of German and European history the opportunity to familiarize themselves with a wide range of research institutions in Germany that will help them in their dissertation research. In the first part of the two-week program, the participants learned to read documents in old German handwriting. The second part consisted of visits to federal, state, and local archives and libraries. The group also met with two scholars to discuss methods and practices of archival research and to learn more about Internet and database research. A crucial part of the seminar was the discussion of the participants’ dissertation projects in four afternoon sessions. The students’ presentations in a semi-formal atmosphere produced lively discussions and paved the way for intense scholarly exchange throughout the two weeks.
Since the very beginning, Walter Rummel, head of the Landesarchiv Speyer, has been an irreplaceable partner of the GHI Archival Summer Seminar. As always, the seminar started off with a well-conceived and motivating introductory course in paleography. The group learned how to read documents from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Rummel’s instructions were not limited to deciphering texts. The group learned a great deal about the procedures of Quellenkritik as Rummel carefully contextualized the sources and taught the basics of Quellenkunde. Rummel was supported by his colleague Franz Maier, who gave a more detailed introduction to nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources. Another part of the program in Speyer was a tour through the Landesarchiv, which gave participants the opportunity to see some of the “crown jewels” from the stacks as well as the repair shop for old documents.

On one of the afternoons in Speyer, the participants met with Isabella Löhrl (University of Heidelberg) to discuss practical aspects of archival research. Sharing her own experience in writing her Ph.D. thesis on international cooperation and the globalization of intellectual property rights in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Löhr gave valuable tips on how to prepare archival visits, on time management, and on using excerpts and databases to process sources.

Following the paleography course, the group visited the Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Abteilung Rheinland, in Düsseldorf. Archivists Uwe Zuber and Kathrin Pilger, also partners of the Archival Seminar for years, explained the organization of the German archive system and gave an overview of their own holdings followed by a tour through the archive. In the afternoon, archivist Verena Kinle introduced the group to the photography collection, and then Zuber led them in some practical exercises working with archival documents.

The third destination was the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz. As in 2010, archivist Thekla Kleindienst introduced the group to the vast holdings of the branches of the Bundesarchiv across Germany followed by a tour of the building in Koblenz. In the afternoon, the participants received an introduction to the digital research tools of the Bundesarchiv’s electronic finding aids and visited the photo archive, where they had the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the digital photo database. It offers access to a continuously growing collection of more than 11 million photographs, posters, and aerial photographs. Kleindienst rounded off the program with a practical exercise in archival research. The participants were given a fictitious
research project and sent on a mission to find sources in the Bundesarchiv’s holdings.

On the seminar’s last day in the Rhineland, Joachim Oepen, another established partner of the GHI, welcomed the group at the Historisches Archiv des Erzbistums Köln. In an inspiring presentation, he explained the practical consequences of the Provenienzprinzip, which is a crucial principle of organization for many archives in Europe and the United States. For the participants working on early modern history and German history in the nineteenth century, especially, it was most useful to learn how the many administrative changes on the regional and state levels affected the organization of the archive holdings in Germany. For example, in the early nineteenth century, secularization resulted in Church archives’ holdings being broken up and transferred to state and local repositories, thus creating a complicated network of archives. Similar outcomes ensued from the political changes after 1945. Following this theoretical introduction, the students conducted hands-on exercises, working with finding aids to locate files for a specific research question—in this case, the confiscation of a seminary building by the National Socialists.

The last station of the seminar was Leipzig, where the group first visited the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek. Starting with an introduction by Cornelia Ranft to the library’s history, statutory tasks, and everyday activities, the group was given a tour through the library including the Deutsche Musikarchiv and the brand new building of the Deutsches Buch- und Schriftmuseum. Afterwards, Uta Spaet und Jörg Räuber acquainted the group with the library’s comprehensive activities collecting books in German and about Germany from all over the world, as well as with the challenges of book handling, storage, and restoration. In the afternoon, Birgit Honeit introduced the library’s electronic research tools, providing the participants with a very good starting point for their own work. After leaving the Nationalbibliothek, the group visited the nearby Völkerschlachtdenkmal.

The last archive on the seminar’s route was the Archiv Bürgerbewegung Leipzig e.V. This privately organized archive offers a collection of documents on the history of the “Peaceful Revolution” in the German Democratic Republic. Archivists Monika Keller and Rainer Müller, members of the Verein and activists in the GDR civil rights movement, told the group about the archive’s extraordinary history and goals and gave an introduction to the collection. Having seen only governmental archives up to that point, participants appreciated
the visit to the Archiv Bürgerbewegung, which illustrated the diversity in the German archive system; this important addition to the tour also presented them with a stimulating encounter with recent German history.

In the afternoon, the seminar group met Christiane Sibille (University of Basel), a specialist in the history of the League of Nations. Sibille introduced the group to German online research tools and networks for researchers, providing an excellent overview of journal databases, digitization projects, archival web sites, and communication platforms for historians.

The GHI organizers would like to extend their heartfelt thanks to all the individuals and organizations that made the 2011 Archival Summer Seminar in Germany a success. An announcement of the program for the 2012 seminar can be found on the GHI web site at http://www.ghi-dc.org/seminars.

Mario Daniels (GHI)