

RE: SOURCES
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**POSTERS OF THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC AT
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES**

Note from the Re: Sources Editor: This is my first contribution as editor of *Re:Sources*, and I'm proud to join the team of editors and authors who work diligently to put together each issue of this fine journal. I vow to try and maintain the standard of quality set by my immediate predecessor, Nena Couch—a daunting task, to be sure. I hope that you will find something of use within the pages of this column and that you will consider yourself an active participant in the shaping of its future. In the November 2006 issue (47.2) of *Theatre Survey*, which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the American Society for Theatre Research, editor Jody Enders invited readers to “ponder anew” what constitutes a resource and to submit “untraditional proposals” for the *Re:Sources* column. As she explained:

Perhaps it is a document or a series of documents available for the first time when an entire collection is declassified. It could be that odd scribble somewhere that proves that, once upon a time, there really was a performance of a play that everyone else had taken to be closet drama. Maybe it is a transcription or an English translation of a document hitherto unseen, difficult to access, almost impossible to read. (165)

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I echo her sentiment and invite you to send ideas, comments, and submissions, both traditional and untraditional. I hope this column serves as a conduit for discovery and collaboration and that it does indeed help you ponder anew not only what constitutes a resource but also how these resources can inform and enlighten your own work.



In 2009, George Mason University Libraries purchased approximately seventy-five hundred posters that document culture, politics, and art in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from the 1940s to 1990. With this acquisition, George Mason became the only American university to house such a large collection of cultural and political GDR posters.¹ The collection, housed in the Special Collections & Archives unit of the Fenwick Library on the Fairfax, Virginia, campus, consists primarily of German-language posters, although the political and film series also contain some in Russian. The posters generally range in size from 40 × 29.25 cm to 99.5 × 69.5 cm; the average size is 57 × 81 cm. The majority of the posters date from the late 1970s to the end of the 1980s. The collection is currently being processed and will eventually be divided into series that include political posters, performing arts posters, film posters, art exhibition posters, and posters by individual artists.

The *political series* contains posters relating to the various political parties of East Germany and their associated events and programs. It also contains campaign posters from the 1990 elections that promote candidates from the major East German political parties. Some of the posters in the political series are overtly ideological, and others focus on communist or socialist ideals; these feature images of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, or other notable communist figures. The *film series* includes posters for films that were screened in East Germany. Though the majority are for films produced in other countries, some are for films produced locally. A significant portion of the posters are for films produced outside the former Eastern Bloc, but upon examining the themes of these films, one notes that they usually promote socialist concepts or have socialist undertones. The *art exhibition series* is for posters that promoted and announced art exhibitions in various cities in the GDR, generally of works by East German or Eastern Bloc artists. The *poster artists series* contains posters that were designed and illustrated by East German graphic artists Volker Pfüller, Manfred Butzmann, Wolfgang Janisch, and Hubert Riedel. These are signed by the artists and concern a variety of subjects. Finally, the *performing arts series* is focused on posters for events and performances of opera, theatre, and musical productions that took place in East Germany. Of the theatre posters, approximately 11 percent advertise performances that originated in the United States or Great Britain. When other Western nations are included in this estimate, the figure is closer to 16 percent.

The performing arts posters present a complex and nuanced view of performance in the German Democratic Republic during the cold-war years. The arts were (and arguably continue to be) an ideological weapon of primary importance, reinforcing or countering the dominant cultural paradigm, instituting or



Figure 1.

Figure 1. A [*Connecticut*] *Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1982). Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University Libraries.

disassembling the political schema of the Socialist Unity Party for a captive audience. (Popular Western narratives downplay the effectiveness of artists' dissent or portray the dissent as stifled under the violently repressive East German government.)

The chronology and content of the posters illustrate an undulating timeline of alternately liberal and conservative phases, during which artists crafted their work in periods of greater or more limited autonomy. Despite the strict censorship in East Germany, during the liberal periods, authorities allowed a substantial number of Western performances to take place.

In the GDR, America was conceived of primarily as a system of production; its levels of profit and abundance both awed and provoked the war-torn and comparatively impoverished East Germans. The American obsession with productivity and consumption drew the most bitter criticism from German observers, and it was said that while Europe remained the home of true *Homo sapiens*, America nurtured a clever but shallow *Homo faber* (man the maker, or man the smith), whom some East Germans disdained for his superficial liberality and pseudoegalitarianism.² Interesting to consider in this context is the performance of *Ein Yankee an König Artus' Hof* (1982), a play adapted from Mark Twain's novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, in which the protagonist's escalating disillusionment with technology is a prominent motif. Even though Fordism may have been grudgingly accepted in the GDR as

necessary for economic growth and the ultimate progress of the state, the assimilation of America's cultural barbarism through media imports was fiercely resisted, as evidenced by the graphic created to represent this play (Fig. 1).

The state may have resisted America's cultural barbarism, but young people did not. Attending productions of the American media was a chance for them to distance themselves from their parents, from National Socialism, and from the failures of World War II. Emulating American clothing styles and aggressive behaviors like those exhibited in such films as *The Wild One* (1953) and *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) became popular among some working-class youth, who fostered a street-gang subculture that was referred to using the resurrected bourgeois term *Halbstarke*, "half-strong" or immature, a term gang members used ironically to refer to themselves. Although the *Halbstarcken* subculture was clearly present, East German authorities staunchly asserted that it did not exist under socialism, and if they referred to the social phenomenon at all, they used the British term "rowdies" to emphasize that the problem was in fact a foreign import.³ One official statement read:

The fatherland of the youth is the German Democratic Republic, because it is here that the best national traditions and the great cultural heritage of the German people are preserved, cultivated, and made accessible to the working people, and not where American nonculture, nationalist-supremacist race hatred, gangster movies, trash novels, boogie-woogie, etc., are supposed to prepare the adolescents for murder, killings, and war.⁴

Releases of unflattering depictions of Western society were applauded for their graphic portrayals of the social conditions that emphasized the decadence of the capitalist West. The 1973 screening of the quintessential American street-gang movie *West Side Story* (1961) illustrates this point.

Also of concern to GDR officials was their perception that in America, masculinization was unbalancing gender roles. Many of the American films featured story lines in which an economically and sexually independent woman, with bobbed hair, short skirts, and a fixation on movies and consumption, bragged of reigning over her man while in reality she allowed her hypermasculine partner, with his "Gorilla sex appeal," to beat her up.⁵ The increasing emulation of these behaviors by German women served to exacerbate the government's postwar vilification of Western media as responsible for the corruption of East German society. A particularly interesting poster to highlight here is for a 1989 production of the stage musical *Sugar* (1972), adapted from the film *Some Like It Hot* (1959). The poster depicts a caricature of a bearded individual with an exaggerated bra, emphasizing the performance's prominent theme of cross-dressing. Arguably, this performance pointed to the United States (and West Germany as a cultural proxy) as the originator(s) of such inversions.

In November 2009, George Mason University Libraries received a grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources to catalog all of the posters. This two-year cataloging project will provide item-level access for researchers and allow Special Collections & Archives staff to locate posters

easily for exhibits and class visits. The finding aid and inventory for the performing arts posters, approximately a thousand items, will be available online sometime in 2011.

ENDNOTES

1. The study of theatre and performance that took place in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is thriving, and this collection is a welcome addition to other primary resources from the GDR that are now available in the United States. It takes its place alongside other major collections of visual resources such as the East German Art Collection, 1946–1992 held by Stanford University and the DEFA (Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft) Film Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.—BK

2. Mary Nolan, “America in the German Imagination,” in *Transactions, Transgressions, and Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan*, ed. Heide Fehrenbach and Uta G. Poiger (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 3–25, at 9.

3. Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000), 85.

4. *Ibid.*, 84.

5. *Ibid.*, 77.