

# **Anthropology in the German Democratic Republic: A Personal Odessey**

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Anthropology as an academic discipline varies considerably cross-nationally. My Fulbright Lectureship in the Department of British and American Studies at Humboldt University in East Berlin during September 1988 - February 1989 provided me with the opportunity to meet fellow anthropologists who acquainted me with the history and organization of our discipline in the German Democratic Republic. Dr. Walter Rusch in Bereich Ethnographie at Humboldt University and Professor Karl Sommer, Director of the institute for Anthropology at Humboldt University, played particularly significant roles in my personal odyssey through GDR anthropology. My contacts with GDR anthropologists also brought me into contact with anthropologists from other European countries, including Emmanuel Terray from the Ehess African Studies Center in Paris, Tamas Hoffman (the General Director of the Ethnographic Museum in Budapest), Josef Kotecs (the University of Debrecen in Hungary), Professor Piminov (Director of the Ethnographic Institute at Moscow University), and Josef Wolf (Member of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Prague).

## **German Anthropology Prior to 1949**

Prior to the late nineteenth century, German anthropology was a holistic discipline as was evidenced by Henrik Steffin's textbook *Anthropologie*. Steffin, a Norwegian, lectured primarily on ethnography at Berlin University. Early German anthropology drew upon *Naturphilosophie* or natural philosophy, an endeavor that attracted naturalists, physicists, and anatomists. *Naturphilosophie*, however, went into decline as Darwinian theory gained popularity on the Continent. In organizing American anthropology as a four subdiscipline endeavor, Franz Boas drew some of his inspiration from two famous German scholars - Adolf Bastien, an ethnographer at Berlin University (or what is today Humboldt University), and Rudolf Virchow, a pathologist at the same institution. According to Harris (1968:265), "Both of them, Bastien with his belief in universal genn thoughts and Virchow with his strong physiological interests, were concerned

with regularities and processes." Ironically, German anthropology or Anthropologie as a biocultural endeavor began to divide up into relatively separate disciplines consisting of Anthropologie (physical anthropology), Ethnologie or Ethnographie (ethnology or ethnography), and Ur-Geschichte or Archeologie (prehistory or archeology) beginning in the 1860s. Nevertheless, the three disciplines found a common institutional base within the German Society for Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory which was established in 1870. After World War I the Society disbanded into separate organizations, including the German Anthropological Society and the German Ethnographic Society. Friedrich Ratzel, an anthropogeographer, also played a significant role in the development of German anthropology. Bastien is regarded to be the father of modern-day German Ethnographie. Ethnographie became divided into Volkskunde (the study of German-speaking peoples) and erkunde (the study of other cultures). Many German physical anthropologists, including Josef Mengele, were involved in raciology and eugenics studies, during the Nazi period. Otto Reche, a racist physical anthropologist, established the Institut für Rassen und Volkerkunde at the University of Leipzig.

### **The Reemergence and Organization of Anthropology and Ethnography in the GDR**

The Marxist-Leninist leadership of the newly created German Democratic Republic (est. in 1949) viewed Anthropologie and perhaps to a lesser degree Ethnographie with suspicion because of their associations with the fascist cause. Nevertheless, both disciplines underwent a gradual rehabilitation in the early years of the GDR. Julius Lips, who taught in exile during the Nazi period in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University, reestablished in 1947 an ethnographic institute at the University of Leipzig (renamed Karl Marx University in 1953). Lips conducted research on the Naskapi, particularly on the impact of colonialism on their economy. He became the rector of the University of Leipzig in 1949, but died in 1952. His wife, Ava Lips, served as Director of the Institute until 1968. She had conducted research and wrote popular books on Native Americans, particularly in the Andes. An ethnographic institute was reestablished at Humboldt University in Berlin. Lectures in Anthropology began to be conducted in the GDR during the early 1950s, and the Institute for Anthropology was established at the Museum of Natural History in Berlin in 1955. An Institute for Anthropology and Human Genetics was also established at Friedrich-Schiller University in Jena. Presently Ethnographie

and Archeologie, exist as sub-departments in the Department of History at Humboldt University. Bereich Ethnographie forms a sub-department of the Department of African and Near Eastern Studies at Karl Marx University. Bereich Ethnographie at Humboldt University includes specialists in both schools in Berlin and Jena. Twelve physical anthropologists work at the institute for Anthropology at Humboldt University. The Institute also has 153 collaborators, primarily physicians situated in clinics and institutes. Anthropologie in the GDR has developed subspecialities in medical anthropology, developmental anthropology, industrial anthropology, and historical anthropology. Medical anthropology focuses on issues such as human orthopedics, forensic medicine, dental growth, and the relationship between body composition and disease. In its research on developmental anthropology, the Institute for Anthropology conducts research on the physiological and genetic characteristics of various population cohorts in the GDR (Flugel, Greil, and Sommer 1988) and, in cooperation with the Institute for the Hygiene of Children and Youth, on the psychosexual development of GDR youth. Industrial anthropology applies physical anthropological data to the design of work clothes and furniture for state firms. Historical anthropology focuses on the examination of skeletal remains of former populations that resided in present-day GDR territory and serves as a link between Anthropologie and Archeologie.

The Institute for Anthropology is in the process of restoring and examining the Virchow collection of skeletal remains from all over the world. Much of the collection, which was stored in boxes during World War II, is covered with algae and water-damaged. Lothar von Schbtt directed the investigation of the skeletal remains of the Old Berliners and the construction of the Old Berliners exhibit which was originally assembled for the 750th anniversary of Berlin in 1987 and is not housed in the Museum of Natural History - the site of the institute for Anthropology.

### **GDR Anthropology In Its Societal and Global Context**

GDR Ethnographie draws upon Marxist-Leninist theory in its attempt to chronicle the socio-economic development of human societies (Rusch and Winkelmann 1987). While much of GDR Ethnographie has focused on preliterate and pre-capitalist state societies or traditional customs in the GDR, some GDR ethnographers, such as Ute Mohrmann and Irene Runge, are giving increasing attention to social life in GDR cities. While at first glance Anthropologie may

appear to be more apolitical in its concerns, Professor Karl Sommer told me that, in keeping with socialist ideals, the discipline is interested in altering the biosocial environment in order to further develop human potentials.

GDR ethnographers maintain active contacts with their colleagues in the Soviet Union, other Eastern European countries, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Austria. Frederick Rose corresponds regularly with Richard Lee at the University of Toronto since both of them share interests in hunting and gathering societies. GDR physical anthropologists also maintain contacts with colleagues in other countries, including those in the FRG. One physical anthropologist suggested to me that his FRG colleagues are looking to developments in GDR Anthropologie with great interest because Anthropologie in the FRG has not undergone the same process of rehabilitation as it has in the GDR.

Compared to American anthropology, GDR anthropology remains a relatively obscure academic endeavor both within its own country and internationally. In some ways, GDR anthropologists work in an environment reminiscent of American anthropology in the early decades of this century. One GDR ethnographer described the community of GDR ethnographers as a Dorf or village. Bereich Ethnographie at Humboldt University has only some 30 undergraduate students and only a few graduate students. As noted earlier, Anthropologie can only be studied at the post-doctoral levels. According to one GDR ethnographer, some GDR Volkerkunde specialists have been unable to conduct participant observation on various cultural groups in capitalist World countries or North America due to the shortage of hard currency faced by the GDR state. As a consequence, these specialists must rely upon the limited library materials that exist in the GDR. The shortage of hard currency also makes it difficult for GDR physical anthropologists to visit their colleagues in the FRG, despite their mutual research interests. Nonetheless, both ethnographers and physical anthropologists from Western Europe seem to increasingly be visiting their GDR colleagues and even collaborating with them. I suspect that I have been one of the few American anthropologists who has established contacts with GDR anthropologists. On December 14, 1988, I, presented an overview of recent trends in American anthropology, particularly cultural anthropology, in Bereich Ethnographie at Humboldt University. In the spirit of glasnost, I am pleased to add that Professor Pimenov from Moscow University was also present at my talk. I also presented a paper on the development of medical anthropology in the United States at the Biopsychosocial Unity of Humanity

Conference, an interdisciplinary conference at Humboldt University Volkerkunde and Volkerkunde whereas Bereich Ethnographie at Karl Marx University focuses on Volkerkunde. At Humboldt University, Ute Mohrmann (1988) focuses on GDR folk life and factory workers, Walter Rusch on African studies, Ursula Wittenberg on Vietnam, Jugenburg Winklmann on Soviet peoples, Irene Runge on the Netherlands (1988) and family and aging in the GDR, and Frederick Rose on Australian aborigines. At Karl Marx University, some eight ethnographers have tended to concentrate their research activities on peoples of Africa and the Middle East and, at the theoretical level, the Bereich is developing an interest in state formations and ethnic minorities.

At the present time, there are some 300 ethnographers in the GDR, with about 40-45 of them specializing in Volkerkunde and the remainder specializing in Volkskunde. Most of the Volkskunde specialists work in local museums scattered throughout the GDR. Sixteen Volkerkunde specialists work at the Museum fur Volkerkunde in Leipzig and 11 or 12 Volkerkunde specialists work at the Museum fur Volkerkunde in Dresden. Some ethnographers also work at the Academy of Sciences in Berlin. The sole professional anthropological journal in the GDR is the Ethnographisch-Archaeologische Zeitschrift but the Museum fur Volkerkunde in Leipzig publishes a popular ethnographic journal as well as annual yearbook. Whereas training exists at both the undergraduate and graduate level in ethnography at two of the seven GDR universities, training in physical anthropology exists only at the graduate level. GDR physical anthropologists are either human biologists or physicians, many of whom are conducting research on Anthropologie. The two Institutes for Anthropology are affiliated with the medical during January 25-27, 1989 attended by scholars from the GDR, FRG, Soviet Union, United States, and various Eastern European countries. What the possibilities for research opportunities for American anthropologists are in the GDR remain to be seen, but in the spirit of increasing dialogue between scholars from the East and West, I feel that the potential for contact with our colleagues in the German Democratic Republic looks promising, regardless of whether or not the two Germanies reunify.

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