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LAURE Essay

In the History Honors Program at Miami University – and as a 2015 Dean’s Scholarship recipient – I have been given the invaluable opportunity to conduct research and produce my very own undergraduate thesis. This experience has brought me great joy, enhanced my passion for history, and helped me grow as a writer and researcher. For roughly three semesters, I have been working on a project that examines the discourse surrounding women in East Germany and Eastern Europe, and analyzes the communism’s effect on their Cold War and post-war lives. My thesis is divided into three chapters, representing three “waves” of discourse. The first wave features state-regulated and state-distributed propaganda and literature asserting that socialism provided a specifically advantageous space for women. The second wave, from the early 1990s to the early 2000s, is concentrated heavily with primary accounts (e.g. memoirs, essays, and interviews). These sources reveal the suppressed reality that East Germany and Eastern Europe were in fact not beneficial for women, but were actually harmful to their economic, political, and social wellbeing. The third wave came about around 2005, with Angela Merkel’s election as German Chancellor as the primary catalyst. This wave reexamines the socialist state’s policies towards women (*Frauenpolitik*) and reassesses the harmfulness of their system. By examining these three distinct waves, I am able to organize my study thematically and chronologically.

For sources in the first wave, I have located women’s testimonies such as novelist Christa Wolf’s personal essay “What Remains,” scholarly research assessing women’s place in the GDR such as Marilyn Rueschemeyer and Christiane Lemke’s *The Quality of Life in the German Democratic Republic: Changes and Developments in a State Socialist Society* (1989), and propagandized materials such as Evelyn Richter’s photographs and Volker Koepp’s documentaries on female industrial workers. For the second wave – when the library’s resources proved most valuable – I used journal articles and books that emerged after the fall of communism and assessed the situation for up to ten years later. In this chapter, I employ those with titles such as “German Democratic Republic: Emancipated Women or Hardworking Mothers?” (1992), “Learning to Say ‘I’ Instead of ‘We’: Recent Works on Women in the Former GDR” (1991), and “Theorizing Feminism in Postcommunism” (2000). In the third wave, I rely on sources that analyze Angela Merkel’s political career and tie in her East German upbringing. In this chapter I use her biography written by Stefan Kornelius (2013) and journal articles such as “The Making of Chancellor Merkel” (2006) and “Angela Merkel: What Does it Mean to Run as a Woman?” (2006). Each wave is comprised of sources gathered with the help of Miami’s library.

This three-wave analysis was not always my intention, however, as the focus of my project has shifted many times. Although I have always had a clear vision for my research *topic*, taking a historical approach requires an original, thought-provoking research *question* that warrants an equally original and thought-provoking conclusion. I began this process by considering my own personal historic interests and what contribution I could make to the existing scholarship, narrowing it down to women’s history and the Cold War. The next natural step was to consult an adviser and browse the Miami University library database. In this search, I discovered that Miami’s collection of texts on women’s history and post-communist Eastern Europe is extensive. With a project entirely based on thirty years of discourse, it is crucial to discover what materials are at my disposal and are easily attainable. Browsing the “Course and Subject Guides” for History and Women’s and Gender Studies and the “A-Z Database” on the library website, I

located various channels through which I could search and compile sources that are now featured in my bibliography. I have been able to continue my research process with such ease and progress because of Miami's vast collection of related sources, and their access to academic journals, OhioLink, online databases such as ABSEES and "European History Primary Sources," and online newspaper archives.

Almost half of my thesis bibliography is composed of journal articles from the 1990s and 2000s. Through JSTOR and OhioLink, I gained access to the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, the *Journal of Women's History*, the *Journal of Russian and Asian Studies*, *Feminist Studies*, the *Oral History Review*, *German Politics and Society*, and *Signs*. Online newspaper archives such as the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* also serve as secondary contextual resources. But perhaps the most valuable (and exciting) materials that I have gained access to through Miami's library are the *Ms.* magazine volumes featured in the IMC collections. Our library contains tangible copies of the publication stretching across thirty years which allowed me to physically flip through each relevant volume and conduct primary research in person. Another library resource that facilitated in-person primary research is Special Collections. As a History major, I have visited the Special Collections in King Library on numerous occasions. Their featured propaganda collections (e.g. posters, postcards) have provided me with valuable primary materials for this project, and I am grateful to have access to such intriguing and rare items. The tangible primary research that I have conducted at Miami's libraries has expanded the potential of my project and adds to the relevance of my historical approach.

While I had much success in compiling my bibliography, I also faced a number of setbacks. I am not fluent in German, therefore I have to rely on only English texts, which presents a challenge when this was and is a heavily researched topic in Germany itself. Luckily, many texts have been translated into English, and this area of study necessitates an international and interdisciplinary audience. I also faced the added challenge of studying abroad during the first semester of my thesis research. I was miles away from all the resources I needed to embark on this elaborate project. When I returned to Miami after my semester abroad, I delved into the library's materials to make up for lost time, and have been on track ever since. These challenges made me appreciate the resources that are available to me at Miami University and have taught me to never take advantage of our undergraduate research opportunities.

My undergraduate education at Miami has undoubtedly been emboldened by my access to its library system, and has encouraged me to pursue my historic and research tendencies in graduate school. After I graduate in May, I plan on pursuing a dual MA/MLS degree in History and Library Sciences at Indiana University. My ultimate goal is to work in archives at a historical institution and fuel my passion for research and learning. Working with primary and secondary sources from the Miami University libraries has opened new doors for me during both my undergraduate and post-graduate career, and I am eternally grateful for the unique opportunity and formative experience of writing an undergraduate thesis through the History Honors program. Because of the depth of my project, I would like to believe that I have used the library's resources to their full potential. But, truly, I know that I have not yet exhausted the endless opportunities that Miami's library provides its students.