

Narrative Report

Graduate Travel/Research Grant provided by funding from the European Commission and Carleton University's Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research and administered by the Centre for European Studies at Carleton University

Karin Abma, 2nd year MA

Thanks to the Centre for European Studies, I was able to travel to Berlin, Germany at the end of August to conduct archival research for my major research paper. Since I am interested mainly in history, I chose for my research paper a historical topic examining how women navigated consumerism in the former East Germany.

Under communism, consumer goods production was put far down the list of priorities, especially in relation to industry. Since women in communist societies are often left with the double burden of working and also taking care of the household, it was primarily the woman's job to feed and clothe her family. My research looks into how women in the GDR navigated these high expectations creatively and also how they interacted with the state which controlled consumer goods production. To do this effectively, I chose to look at a state-produced women's magazine called "Frau von Heute." In Berlin I was able to access these magazines at the Staatsbibliothek (state library). Within these magazines I found a wealth of information on how the state saw women, what she looked like, what she wore and how, and what kind of issues surrounding women were talked about. There are also letters to the editor revealing what women would and could say about the images and stories in the magazine. Since these magazines are only available in Germany, this research trip was both necessary to my research paper and very educational for me personally about culture and language in Berlin. I also gained greater understanding of the historical and geographical context of Cold War Berlin by spending some days at the German Historical Museum, the DDR Museum, and the Palace of Tears Museum, as well as visiting various other communist era monuments around the city and the Stasi Museum. All of these experience contributed to my greater understanding of how, on a broader level, East German society was made up, and then also one a more intimate level, what everyday reality looked like for women and families in East Berlin.

I would like to thank Dr. Joan DeBardeleben and Brigid Bedard-Hinz of the Centre for European Studies for making this research possible, and also my supervisor, Jennifer Evans for her helpful guidance. I am thankful that the CES was able to provide funding in order to conduct my research, and would not have been able to do it without their support.