

Women in East Germany: A Public History; CETS 2011 Research Abroad Project



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Goals of the Project

- ❖ Feminist perspectives have transformed research, scholarship and teaching of German history.
- ❖ This project investigated whether women's history has also informed representations of the past encountered in public history venues (historical sites and museums) in Berlin.
- ❖ It also considered whether narratives about German women's history are accessible to English-speaking tourists.



Anna Seghers
http://sailco.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Anna_Seghers_Blit2.jpg



Christina Wolf
<http://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/cka/fotostrecke-75784-2.html>

Anna Seghers and Christina Wolf

- ❖ Two famous female authors helped shape public discourse and literary culture in East Germany.
- ❖ Seghers was a communist who fled Nazi Germany and returned to East Germany after the war. Her novels presented moral critiques of fascism and were celebrated by the East German state.
- ❖ Wolf belonged to the post-war generation. She was an active member of the SED. She helped create a specifically east Germany literary culture and explored feminist themes in her writings.

DDR Everyday Life Museum

- ❖ The DDR Museum is largely profit-based and presents hands-on activities that are meant to allow people to experience the life of East Germans.
- ❖ Historical objects that relate to woman's history were included in this museum.
- ❖ Yet, the DDR Museum does not present any explicit narratives that enlighten the public of the role that gender played in East Germany.



This project was conducted in Berlin in 2011 during a faculty-led summer study abroad program in Central Europe. Research conducted by Andrew Nelson, Mark Van Den Broek, Tszman Gao, Annie Redwachs, and Brady Zweifelhofer. The project will inform sections of Dr. Sanislo's book manuscript, *Gendering the European Tour*.



West and East Germany

<http://www.maps-of-germany.co.uk/images/map-of-east-west-germany.gif>

Women in East Germany Before and After 1989

- ❖ The socialist movements in Germany claimed that women's liberation would result from a revolution and participation in the paid labor force.
- ❖ The east German state provided generous state subsidies for child care and other support to encourage women work outside the home. Yet, women still faced gender discrimination in the work place and party.
- ❖ Women had a "double burden" of working a shift in the marketplace, as well as another, much publically ignored shift inside of the home, taking care of the family.
- ❖ The collapse of communism and state industries after 1989 created high unemployment rates.
- ❖ With the expansion of the private sector, more market based jobs became available to women in former communist areas.
- ❖ Women found it much more difficult than men to find jobs to begin with and to find reemployment, which was largely due to discriminatory hiring practices within the workforce.
- ❖ Women were often underrepresented in the political spectrum and legislation was passed that did not take into account the special needs of women.



DDR Everyday Life Museum

<http://www.ddr-museum.de/en/>



Conclusion

- ❖ The DDR Museum of Berlin presents traditional male-centered and/ or gender neutral narratives of the past.
- ❖ The guide from the Berlin on Bike company reinforced traditional assumptions that the public is uninterested in women's history.
- ❖ These two for-profit venues probably do not employ people who are familiar with scholarship on German women's history.
- ❖ The geographic location and lack of English materials means that fewer tourists will visit the Seghers house and understand the important role that female writers played in the East German literary culture and public sphere.
- ❖ Activism is needed to help inform and educate for-profit tour companies and museums and generate English materials for smaller, more out of the way, less well-known museums that formerly belonged to the East German state.

Research Methods

- ❖ Identify key themes of the secondary literature in German's women's history regarding women in East Germany.
- ❖ Examine the ways that scholars have tried to bring women into public history and the issues that they faced doing so.
- ❖ Recognize the importance of the historical gendering of public space.
- ❖ Examine the historic sites and monuments in Berlin and consider if women are represented proportionally to men.
- ❖ Consider the issues of access to English speakers.



Anna Seghers Museum

<http://www.ks-berlin.de/typo3temp/pics/de1295226.jpg>



Anna Seghers Museum

- ❖ The Anna Seghers Museum is a state-owned house museum.
- ❖ The apartment that she lived in is far from the center in an eastern neighborhood. It is far afield for most tourists.
- ❖ The museum was opened to the public during the communist time in 1985 and remains largely unchanged since then.
- ❖ The museum does not contain any English speaking materials or English guides for the public.

Interview with Berlin on Bike Tour Company

- ❖ The Berlin on Bike Tour company markets to English speaking tourists. Their guides have no academic training in history. They do not take tourists to the Seghers house or go inside the DDR museum.
- ❖ They only visit sites that are central and can be seen from outside and claim that people are not interested in women's history.

The printing of this poster was funded by Differential Tuition. The faculty-student collaborative research component of the CETS program is funded by a Blugold grant.