

*European Archives in an Era of Change*

# Democracy and Federalism: Changes in the National Archival System in a United Germany

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IN THE FALL OF 1989, during the *Wende* (the turning point) that took place in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), it was impossible for archivists to predict the scope and dynamics of change affecting the political and constitutional situation in the GDR, and indeed in most of Central Europe. At that time, the citizens living in the GDR claimed the civil rights that the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) had *de facto* denied them. The fall of the Wall on November 8, 1989, marked the culmination of a movement of civil disobedience—still inconceivable in October—against a regime that had included the word “democratic” in its name, but that had in reality always disregarded the civil rights of its citizens. The large majority of the population in the GDR underwent a process of democratization, but this did not yet represent a questioning of the existence of the state itself. The German and the international press called it the unexpected success of a revolution without bloodshed, as such without precedent in German history.

In this phase, the archival work in the

GDR also experienced the first signs of opening and of vast changes in personnel. The efforts of citizens’ committees (*Bürgerkomitees*) that had formed in great numbers in Berlin and in other East German cities in the fall of 1989 were also supported by individual members of the national archives. These archivists went on to prepare for the establishment of an independent professional organization for archivists.<sup>1</sup> At the turn of the year 1989/90, it was clear that the democratization of governmental institutions would also affect the national archives.

When this article was written in July 1991, it was apparent that the *Wende* that had taken place in November 1989 in the GDR had not been the culmination of developments, but only an intermediate stage. In-

<sup>1</sup>The *Verband der Archivare der DDR* was founded on 12 May 1990 in Berlin; Gerhard Schmid (Weimar) and Hermann Schreyer (Potsdam) were elected chairmen. Only a half year later the association was dissolved (15 December 1990). The members were invited to join the *Verein Deutscher Archivare*, the organization of professional archivists existing since 1946 in the Federal Republic of Germany.

deed, it was the beginning of a process that brought about the disintegration of the political institutions of the GDR which finally, on October 3, 1990, resulted in the dissolution of the second German State and in the realization of German unity. This event had been preceded by the currency union on July 1, 1990. However, even the signing of the unification treaty and its ratification by the *Deutscher Bundestag*, the West German parliament, and by the *Volksskammer*, the Chamber of Deputies of the GDR, on September 23, 1990, and the resulting German unification did not mark the end of changes. On October 14, 1990, regional elections were held in the "accession" areas. The *Länder* (states) that had been dissolved in 1952 were reestablished.<sup>2</sup> The federal system of the Federal Republic of Germany was completed in the form of a *Gesamtstaat* comprising the whole of Germany.<sup>3</sup> The first free elections to an all-German parliament since the end of the Weimar Republic followed on December 2, 1990! On June 20, 1991, the newly elected *Deutsche Bundestag* voted on the future seat for parliament and government. The majority of the members of parliament decided against Bonn and for Berlin as the capital of a united Germany.

The reader must keep in mind the dates of events, reflecting the far-reaching constitutional changes, in order to understand the dynamic nature of changes in the national archives brought about during the year 1990. In that one year, the process of change

took place at such an accelerated intensity that its potential impact can still not be fully assessed. To evaluate this impact, it is useful to reflect on the most important elements characterizing the development of the national archives in the Federal Republic and in the GDR.

At the end of World War II, the national archives in the four occupied zones were in quite a similar situation: all of them were first of all concerned with securing existing materials which had been endangered by bomb damage and by the evacuation of some of the archives. The archival administrations in the East and West had to face similar problems at the *Länder* level when they tried to reorganize. Of course the Prussian state archival administration ceased to exist after the dissolution of the state of Prussia. The states of Lower Saxony, of North Rhine-Westphalia, and of Schleswig-Holstein set up new archival organizations succeeding the Prussian tradition. The archives in the *Länder*, which were established up to 1947, were assigned to the ministries of culture or to the prime minister's office (*Staatskanzleien*). The national archives serving the seat of the *Länder* governments took over the function of *Land* archives. The impact of the Cold War could be seen first on a central level. The Central Archive that was founded in Potsdam following a military decree on May 8, 1946, was able to perform the function of a *Reichs-Archiv* (national archives) only within the Soviet-occupied zone. After the establishment of the GDR, this archive was renamed the German Central Archive. It also took care of the historical materials moved from the Secret Archive (*Geheimes Staatsarchiv*), the Central Archive of the former Prussian state that continued to exist as an institution in West Berlin. During the war, these materials had been evacuated to Merseburg where they formed division "U" of the Central Archive of the GDR in Potsdam from 1949 until 1990.

In the Federal Republic of Germany, the

<sup>2</sup>The states of Mecklenburg, Brandenburg, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia existed from 1945/46 until 23 July 1952. They were replaced by a system of regional districts of the central administration, but the states survived in the memory of the citizens. Consequently the reestablishment of the *Länder* was an issue of the revolutionary movement in the GDR since its beginnings.

<sup>3</sup>The unification by the treaty of 23 September 1990 meant the joining of the German Democratic Republic to the Federal Republic of Germany; the constitution (*Grundgesetz*) of 1949 replaced the constitution of the GDR.

Federal Archive (*Bundesarchiv*) began its work on June 3, 1952 in Koblenz, following a decision made by the cabinet of the federal government on March 24, 1950. It was established quickly so that it could serve as a receiving place for the archival collections of the former German Reich within the territory of the Federal Republic. It also served as the final archives for the files that the Western Allies had been giving back since 1946, files of the agencies of the former Reich, of the *Wehrmacht*, and of the offices of the former Nazi party. During the first decade, the Central Archive in Potsdam and the Federal Archive in Koblenz co-existed; there were regular professional contacts between the archivists and, when developing technical concepts, each institution kept in mind the possibility of an expected unification of archival materials.

The final division of the two German states had an impact on the national archival systems in both German states. This could be seen at the end of the fifties, in a process that was marked especially and primarily by the ideology of subordinating the archives and archivists to the sole domination of the Socialist Unity Party within the GDR. From 1957 on, the GDR stopped its archivists from participating in the annual meetings of the professional organization of archivists, the German Archival Days (*Deutschen Archivtagen*), taking place in the Federal Republic of Germany. The construction of the Wall that had begun on August 13, 1961, put a final end to professional encounters between the archivists of the two German states. At this point, the political pressure of the Stalinist apparatus of domination following the Soviet model had fully developed and many archivists were able to avoid persecution only by fleeing to the West.

The subsequent development of the national archives in the East will be outlined here in only a few words. In a series of decrees of July 1950, June 1965, and March

1976, the government of the GDR created the legal basis for a highly centralized archival system under the supervision of a National Archival Administration within the Ministry of the Interior. From the beginning of the sixties, this ministry followed a personnel policy of placing primarily politically reliable *Kader*, persons highly devoted to the security system of the GDR, into leading archival positions. In 1950, following the Soviet model, they created the legal entity of a "National Archival Fonds" that constituted the *Volkseigentum* (the people's property) as part of the total amount of national archival materials. All archival materials, those of the central state as well as the archives of the districts, of the municipalities, of the mass-organizations, and of the socialized industries and businesses were put under the supervision of the archival administration within the Ministry of the Interior of the GDR. From 1976 on, the active records created by the national administration were a part of the National Archival Fonds, a further logical development of professional archival authority. The creation of professional working guidelines and principles—formulated in proclaimed accordance with the programs of the Socialist Unity Party and with priorities set forth by the *Mehrjahrespläne*—corresponded to the centralized organization of the archival system in the GDR.<sup>4</sup> Often, the archivists came up with excellent professional results that found recognition even beyond the borders of the GDR. The special GDR archival periodical, the *Archivmitteilungen*, reflected a type of archival system that, in spite of all the political subordination and a control that was characterized by Party principles, still

<sup>4</sup>The economic system of the former GDR was fixed by planning ratios: since 1948, the Socialist Unity Party formulated aims of economic development in two-year, five-year, etc., plans. These proposed aims had to be observed by the administration and by all public services.

represented a remarkable standard of archival professionalism.

In contrast to the archives in the GDR, the national archives in the Federal Republic of Germany were developed in accordance with the federalist tradition, under the sign of decentralization and a functionally differentiated pluralism. In all those years, the supra-regional cooperation between the directors of the different archival administrations of the *Länder*, including the directors of the respective federal archives, was marked by loyalty to their colleagues. From 1950 on, the biannual Conference of the Archival Department Chiefs of the Union and of the *Länder* served as an instrument of cooperation. It has continued to operate without any legal foundation, but it has functioned nonetheless as an effective central consulting body working toward mutual agreement and the development of precise common principles. By the eighties, when efforts began to establish a legal basis for this archival work, there was an impressive degree of technical archival conformity.

There are only minor differences between the archival laws that were passed in most of the *Länder* and the archival law for the federal union. Even though the archival administrations of the *Länder* are strictly independent, they work closely together with the federal archives to administer archival functions at the intermediate and lower level vis-à-vis agencies and offices of the federal administration. In general, one can point to the cooperation among the federal and the state archives as a paradigm for the vitality of federalism as a constitutional principle, at least based on the experience of four decades of development in the Federal Republic of Germany. The factual independence of the *Länder* archival administrations did not lead to a side-by-side existence, but to a steadily developing co-existence between all groups involved, including the state or *Länder* archives and the federal archives.

The standardized professional education

of young scientific talents at the archival school in Marburg, which had been provided since 1949, further enhanced this development. From 1970 on, the federal archives provided some training assistance by organizing seminars in Koblenz which lasted a couple of weeks. In addition, all archivists now work together in the professional organization, the *Verein Deutscher Archivare*. The special periodical, *Der Archivar*, which appears four times a year, reflects the development that has taken place since the beginning of the forties.

By now, German unification has put an end to the separate development of the national archives in the East and West, but all involved know that a lot of work and intensive discussions about the experience and working methods will be necessary to overcome the results of a division that lasted four decades. Each time they met in 1990, archivists from East and West felt the importance of personally experiencing the conditions in the archives of the other part of the newly united state. The process of getting to know each other involved several stages: participants in the conference for West German archival section chiefs met twice with the directors of the national archives and the GDR chief of the National Archival Administration that was still functioning at that time. On May 7, 1990, the archivists met for the first time in Potsdam; a second meeting followed on July 10 and 11, 1990, in Coburg. In my opinion, looking back, the most important result of these meetings was the realization that the future of the national archives in the GDR would be a federal one. The idea, still entertained in May 1990, to retain parts of the national archival administration of the GDR as a basis for a joint professional archival institute of the union and the *Länder*, was not acceptable. That was not just the opinion of colleagues from the *Länder* that were being reestablished in the East, but also the feeling of colleagues in the West. It was less a question of professional arguments,

but rather the quite understandable reaction of saying no to a national archival administration within the Ministry of the Interior of the GDR which, during the years of the socialist state, had become an instrument the Party could use to direct and control its ongoing work.

Furthermore, in July in Coburg, it became clear that a number of people occupying positions in the national archival system of the GDR had to be replaced, because it had been proven how closely they had worked with the security agencies of the Socialist Unity Party. Without going into the circumstances of political entanglement in individual cases, the integrity and conviction of people involved were questioned, in many cases by their own personnel. Without replacing these suspect workers, it would have been impossible to achieve a solidarity among the archives personnel, a precondition for future work.

Finally, attention was drawn to a discrepancy noticed at once during the first visits to the national archives of the GDR, a discrepancy that existed between the task that was set and the personnel, technology, and facilities available to carry out that task. Unfortunately, the situation has not changed. Contrary to the ideological programming that demanded contributions to state production from the national archives under a socialist system, apparently no investments were made at all in the national archives as part of the planned economy in the East. The quality of the equipment is comparable to what was available in the West after World War II. During the four decades of its existence, the National Archival Administration of the GDR apparently was not able to build a single necessary archival addition. It should be noted that the only new archival building can be found on the grounds of the Ministry for State Security in the Ruschestrasse in Berlin. It is indicative of the system and is indeed quite a typical example of conspiratorial architecture. Today, this building houses the Cen-

tral Archive of the former Ministry for State Security and is in the charge of the Office of the Special Commissioner of the Federal Government handling personnel files created by the state security apparatus.

During the spring and summer of 1990, several archival administrations of the West German *Länder* began to help the archives of the *Länder* in the East which were just being established. The archives in Saxony and Thuringia received advice and practical support from the archival administrations in Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Hesse; North Rhine-Westphalia provided support for Brandenburg, Lower Saxony for Saxony-Anhalt, and Schleswig-Holstein for Mecklenburg. Due to the special situation in Berlin, co-operation began between the *Land* or state archive for the western part of the city and the city archive in the East. In the meantime, archival administrations have been formed in the new *Länder*, most of them originating in the ministries for culture and the sciences. In summary, it can be said that the tradition of federalism in the new *Länder* has confirmed the establishment of the state archives that had developed there before 1945.

Far greater changes took place on the federal level. Based on personal experience, the author can report that initial personal contacts with the director in charge of the Central Archives of the GDR occurred after the *Wende*, on New Year's Day 1990, in the house of a friend in Baden-Baden. At that time, the director, Mrs. Brachmann-Teubner, and I agreed to prepare a joint review of the archival materials in Potsdam and Koblenz. I informed the Ministry of the Interior of the Federal Republic of Germany about my talks, and the people in charge at the cultural section authorized the events that followed: intensive meetings of archivists from Koblenz and Potsdam to exchange a maximum amount of information, to become acquainted as much as possible with the working condi-

tions of our respective partners, and to come up with plans for our future cooperation. At that time, we still believed in a time frame of two to five years for a merger of the archival institutions! Instead, in July of 1990, when the currency union had been established, it became clear that the unification process would have to be accomplished much more rapidly. In Germany during the summer of 1990, people were able to see and experience history in the making—from week to week—at an accelerated pace! This meant, in concrete terms, that during July and August the Federal Archives had to develop new organizational approaches for the merger of the Federal Archives and various other institutions, to discuss them, and to coordinate them with their respective partners in a still existing GDR. At the same time, a supplementary budget (including money for archival positions) had to be worked out for the remainder of the year after October 3 (the date of unification), and, in addition, the 1991 budget had to be prepared. At the same time, the Federal Archives worked to include discussions of professional archival positions in the ongoing negotiations of the unification treaty.

The Federal Archives had to deal with more than a single partner in the GDR. In addition to the Central Archives, there were independent institutions on the federal level, such as the Military Archives of the GDR which was under the Ministry of Defense and also located in Potsdam, and the National Film Archives of the GDR under the Ministry for Cultural Affairs in Berlin. Contacts with their directors were intensified at the beginning of 1990, aimed at gaining more information, and from July on, in preparing for their integration into the Federal Archives. In the framework of this article, I can give but an outline of the unusually intensive and difficult work with regard to all the legal, organizational, and staffing aspects. It required the highest degree of responsibility and commitment from

all the people involved. Seeing that unification was nearing completion, the archivists also mobilized all their forces to succeed in this unique task. At this point, I must confess that there was something fascinating about that task, and my special thanks and my recognition go to our partners involved on the side of the GDR, even to those in the former National Archival Administration. For them, that summer was a lot harder to experience than for the archivists in the Federal Archives!

In retrospect, the following assessments and principles proved to be important for the final results. In the course of unification, many departmental administrations were able to sustain an expansion of their work capacity. On the central level, the archival registration of documents from disintegrating or newly established institutions and organizations could not be neglected at all. Actively securing administrative documents had to have first priority, in order to guarantee that indispensable continuity and uniformity of documentation of administrative actions which are necessary for the establishment of the rule of law.

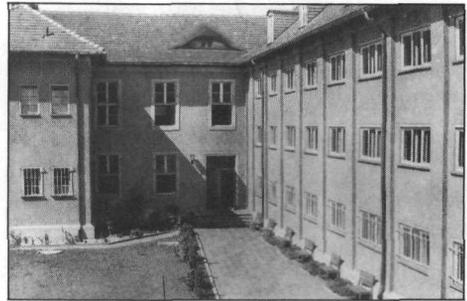
The legal foundations for the professional work of the Federal Archives, the law governing the securing of federal archival materials which was passed on January 6, 1988, had to be included in the unification treaty. In a positive sense, it was possible under these conditions to point out to the colleagues in the state archives of the *Länder* which had not yet been established, but whose future territorial shape was more or less clear, their co-responsibility in terms of securing and preserving state documents from regional and local offices and agencies. The guiding principle of the Federal Archival Law which is committed to the spirit of federalism, that is of working together, had to be secured for the future.

From the beginning, it was clear that it would not be possible to offer all employees who were working for the partner in-



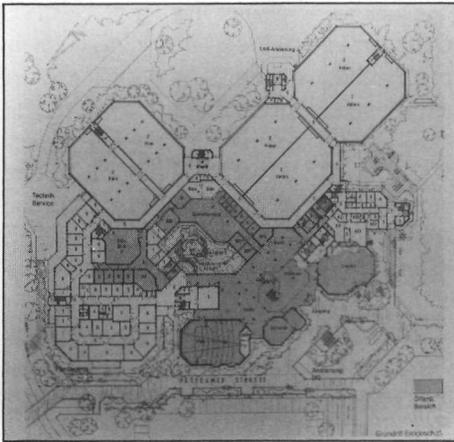
stitutions in the GDR, which was in the final days of its existence, a continuation of their employment in the same position. Therefore, it was even more important that, despite the many problems found in the offices in Potsdam and East Berlin having to do with construction and equipment defects, no archivist thought in terms of transferring professional tasks or archival materials on a major scale to the West. In the working groups which had begun their tasks in March 1990, a high priority had been given to efforts to upgrade and coordinate archival work in the East and West. The Federal Ministry for Intra-German Affairs, which is no longer in existence, had immediately established some programs to help us, and in addition, the Federal Ministry of the Interior quickly provided support in helping us to deliver absolutely necessary technical equipment to Berlin and Potsdam.

Considering the future of the *Bundesarchiv*, it was evident already in the summer of 1990 that every organizational unit of the former Federal Archives had to anticipate future reorganization. Already on September 13, 1990, the federal minister of the interior was able to outline the future archival materials of the Federal Archives in



The building of the former Centrales Staatsarchiv of the GDR, since 3 October 1990 the Bundesarchiv, Abteilungen Potsdam.

an organizational decree. The current organization of the Federal Archives was created at the beginning of September 1990 with the business plan dated January 28, 1991. The new beginning comprised and applied to all offices of the Federal Archives. On this basis, section meetings were held on October 4, 1990, in Koblenz, and on October 8 and 9 in Potsdam and Berlin. At those meetings, the employees were informed that not only the name GDR, but also the names "Central National Archive," "National Archive of the GDR for Films," and "Military Archive of the GDR" had been abolished. In addition, they learned



The Bundesarchiv building in Koblenz, completed in 1986.

that this process involved not only an expansion of the Federal Archives and a simple adding up of retained personnel, of institutions, and materials, but also a new beginning.

It must be emphasized that German unification was offered to us by history—a surprise to most of the citizens living in Germany and to those in leading positions. That we all agreed to take the chance of

unification without any reservation can be seen in historical retrospect as logical and necessary. In that process, it was not only the amount of work done in the respective spheres of activity that changed, but also the quality of the work. From October 3, 1990, the Federal Archives had become an all-German institution. In the past, there was the image of federal archives offices lining up along the Rhine.<sup>5</sup> Today, this model has been replaced by an ellipse which, as everybody knows, has two foci, two fields of force: the field of force Berlin/Potsdam was added to the traditional center in Koblenz. Instead of being located in seven locations, the Federal Archives is now present in twenty-two locations. The number of employees has practically doubled and is at about 800. Accessions have been assigned to individual department sections. Between November 1990 and January 1991, more than 400 informational talks were conducted with staff members. During all those talks, spokesmen for the office personnel

<sup>5</sup>Bundesarchiv offices existing before October 3, 1990, included Koblenz, Freiburg, Rastatt, Frankfurt, Bonn, and Aachen, all located “along the river Rhine.”

in Potsdam and Berlin were present. Every single case where a dismissal of employees seemed inevitable was discussed with them. In each case it was a painful step, especially because of the archival experience that dismissed personnel represented, but nonetheless, this inevitable step had to be taken.

On the other hand, there was an impressive expansion of materials held by the Federal Archives. This can be shown by the following statistics. The written documents from Potsdam and from the interim archives in Berlin represent an increase of 62%; the records in the Military Interim Archives represent an increase of 16% (a number that is low only because the larger share of the written documents of the former *Nationale Volksarmee* will remain for some time with the Federal Armed Forces). In the Film Archives, the increase is 107%! In absolute numbers, this means that the Federal Archives today manages about 190 kilometers of files and about 125,000 titles of movies, both documentary and feature films. It will be very difficult to solve the problems of preservation posed by these quantities of archival materials, and it will take many years. The development of concepts needed for the preservation of different types of archival materials represents one of the most important tasks of the nineties. It may even be difficult to finish the necessary structural renewal before the end of this century. Problems of space, preservation, and restoration are even larger in the archival administrations of the new *Länder*.

As this is being written in July 1991, a number of additional questions have not been solved satisfactorily. Discussions regarding the future of the former Central Archives of the Socialist Unity Party, of the current Archive of the Institute for the History of the Labor Movement in Berlin, and the future of the archives of various other mass

organizations in the GDR are taking place in the German parliament in order to clarify a supplement to the Federal Archival Law. Another controversial draft concerning a final law that would regulate the access to all the *Stasi* files, the above mentioned written documents collected by the former Ministry for State Security, has not been completed. There are other important questions that have to be addressed, e.g., those dealing with a possible expansion of user capacities in archival institutions in the new *Länder* and in the federal archival offices in Potsdam and in Berlin. On all levels, intensive additional professional training programs for the archival employees will have to be developed and organized.

Nevertheless the unresolved tasks can not and should not detract from the historical dimensions of change taking place in the German national archival system. So many possibilities will be created by the federalization and democratization of the archives in the new *Länder*, and there is so much joy about the possibility history has provided for the first time, that is to consolidate the archival materials of the Reich dating from 1871 to 1945 in one organization, in the Federal Archives!

With great respect, I remember the iconography of the National Archives in Washington which I saw for the first time in 1975. During the events that took place in Germany over the last year and a half, I was repeatedly reminded of it. There are inscriptions in the building facade facing Constitution Avenue that refer to the archival materials stored in that building: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty" and "The heritage of the past is the seed that brings forth the harvest of the future." At the entrance towards Pennsylvania Avenue one can read: "Study the past" because "What is past, is prologue!" These words will also apply to the Bundesarchiv in New Germany.

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## Democracy and Federalism: Changes in the National Archival System in a United Germany

*Abstract:* The turning point (*Wende*) that began in the fall of 1989 and which led to the reunification of Germany is reflected in sweeping changes in German archival structures, changes which occurred at such an accelerated pace that their impact cannot be fully realized as yet. The author gives a summary of the development of national archives in the Federal Republic of Germany and in the German Democratic Republic from the end of World War II to reunification on October 3, 1990. From May to October of 1990 plans were made for the reunification of archival structures. The author describes the cooperative work of archivists in East and West Germany and the resulting federal and state (*Länder*) archival structures.

## Démocratie et fédéralisme: Changement des structures des Archives nationales dans une Allemagne unifiée

*Résumé:* Le point tournant (*Wende*) qui commença à l'automne de 1989 et qui conduisit à la réunification de l'Allemagne se reflète par des changements fulgurants des structures archivistiques allemandes. Ces changements ont eu lieu à un rythme si accéléré que leurs impacts ne peuvent encore être complètement réalisés. L'auteur présente un sommaire des développements des archives nationales de la République fédérale d'Allemagne et de la République démocratique d'Allemagne depuis la fin de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale jusqu'à la réunification des structures archivistiques ont été mis en place de mai à octobre 1990. L'auteur décrit le travail coopératif effectué par les archivistes de l'Allemagne de l'Est et de l'Ouest, ainsi que des nouvelles transformations des structures archivistiques fédérales et d'État.

## Demokratie und Föderalismus: Zu den Veränderungen im wiedervereinigten Deutschland

**Abstrakt:** Im Herbst von 1989 begann die Wende, welche zu der Wiedervereinigung von Deutschland führte. Dieser revolutionäre Umbruch spiegelt sich auch in radikalen Änderungen innerhalb der deutschen Archivverwaltung wieder. Die Schnelligkeit der Veränderungen und ihre Auswirkungen können momentan noch nicht voll begriffen werden. Der Autor resümiert das Wachstum nationaler Archivinstitute in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und der Bundesrepublik vom Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs bis zu der Wiedervereinigung vom 3. Oktober 1990. Pläne für die Wiederintegration der Archivstrukturen wurden vom Mai bis Oktober 1990 formuliert. Der Referent beschreibt die Zusammenarbeit der Archivare von Ost und Westdeutschland und die daraus entwickelte Archivstruktur für Staat und Länder.

## Democracia y federalismo: cambios en el sistema archivológico nacional en una alemania unida

**Resumen:** El cambio decisivo (*Wende*) que comenzó en el otoño de 1989 y que lo condujo a la reunificación de Alemania, se refleja en los cambios que barrieron con las estructuras archivológicas alemanas, cambios que ocurrieron a un paso tan acelerado que su impacto no puede ser percibido aún plenamente. El autor da un resumen del desarrollo de los archivos nacionales en la República Federal Alemana y en la República Democrática Alemana desde el final de la Segunda Guerra Mundial hasta la reunificación en octubre 3 de 1990. Desde mayo a octubre de 1990 se hicieron planes para la reunificación de las estructuras archivológicas. El autor describe el trabajo cooperativo de los archiveros en la Alemania Oriental y Occidental y el resultado federal, y estatal (*Länder*) de las estructuras archivológicas.