

Insurance Against Total Destruction: A Postwar History of German Plans to Save the World (Fellowship am Dahlem Humanities Center von Dr. Jennifer Allen)

Initiative: Postdoctoral Fellowships in den Geisteswissenschaften an Universitäten und Forschungsinstituten
in Deutschland und den USA

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This project has two aims: First, it examines the range of possible catastrophes that captivated East and West German imaginations during and after the Cold War. Second, it follows the efforts of governments, research networks, and NGOs in both the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic to hedge against these disasters. The project brings together an unlikely pairing of postwar narratives. It traces the creation of a massive underground archive of black-and-white microfilmed images of Germany's cultural treasures designed as insurance against the mass destruction of German cultural heritage. Germany's Central Recovery Archive has since amassed nearly one trillion microfilmed images. Into this narrative, it weaves the history of East German efforts to preserve biodiversity through gene banking. Though East Germany displayed only lackluster interest in cultural projects like the Central Recovery Archive, it pursued its own, idiosyncratic antidote to total annihilation. Through the work of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Crop Research, it assembled a remarkably robust agricultural gene bank. By collecting the genetic material of plants, bacteria, insects, and small mammals, it set out to safeguard Central European biodiversity. Its work enjoyed international renown, while West Germany lagged in initiating similar genetic preservation efforts. Only in the 1970s, does one finally observe a cross-pollination of these investments. Together, these two histories allow us to analyze the evolution of German thought on the particularly modern question of how to salvage humanity after total destruction. The blueprints drawn up by scientists, archivists, and investors for rebuilding whole cultures from scratch display the shifting values of European institutions of cultural power during and after the Cold War. Together, they reveal how the three postwar Germanys have varyingly fought to preserve their self-conception as protectors of civilization.

Projektbeteiligte

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