The Development of the Memorial Foundations of German Politicians and the American Presidential Libraries—A Comparative View

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Comparing the memorial foundations of German politicians with American presidential libraries is not just a case of “apples and oranges”; considering the scale, it is more like mice and elephants.1 Taking an historical perspective, we can note that the U.S. presidential libraries preceded the German memorial foundations. Konrad Adenauer and his friends, staff, and heirs were well acquainted with the American institutions (which, at the time, did not comprise a network or system, as they do today) before the German foundations came into being. Adenauer’s memorial foundation was the first of its kind. Today, there are five such foundations, yet they did not develop according to any specific plan. Therefore, I will examine the Bundeskanzler-Adenauer-Haus in Rhöndorf (near Bonn) to show the institutional development and typical aspects of this kind of foundation. Next, I shall analyze how other German politicians’ memorial foundations differ. I conclude with some comparative observations regarding American presidential libraries.

Before beginning with an historical outline, we should consider the economic status of the German foundations. In contrast to the usual structure of a foundation, in which assets are designated to an institution for a specific purpose, the memorial foundations of German politicians are funded exclusively by the Federal Republic as part of its annual budget. Until 1998, they were supervised by the Ministry of the Interior, and since then, by the Federal Chancellor’s Deputy for Cultural and Media Affairs.

When Konrad Adenauer died in 1967, many supporters visited his grave and wanted to view his house in Rhöndorf. Within a short time, Paul Lücke, the Minister of the Interior and Adenauer’s right-hand man, together with Hans Globke and the Adenauer family, began to think about erecting a national memorial created by federal law to keep it independent of political changes. Adenauer’s heirs transferred ownership of his house and personal papers to the federal government, which set up a foundation in 1967 under civil law within the Ministry of the Interior as an interim solution. At the time, an SPD/CDU coalition was in power. The mission of the “Stiftung Bundeskanzler-Adenauer-Haus” was “to preserve the memory of the German statesman and worthy European Dr. Konrad Adenauer” for the German and international public. There were
three main tasks: to establish a memorial, which was opened in 1970; to collect Adenauer’s papers; and to organize lectures and conferences with historians and Adenauer’s associates.

This interim foundation was dependent upon the ministry; in a changed political environment, it theoretically could have been transformed or even abolished with one stroke of the minister’s pen. Therefore, from the very beginning Adenauer’s supporters worked to strengthen the institution’s legal status. After eleven years, in November 1978, they succeeded in mustering political support for a bill that would constitute the memorial as an independent foundation under public law. It was the same year that the United States Presidential Records Act established that henceforth such records would become the property of the United States government.

The newly founded “Foundation of Federal Chancellor Adenauer House” was and is a non-partisan and non-profit organization. It combines state, family, and societal interests, reflected in the composition of its governing board of trustees. The board consists of five members appointed by the federal president: two members are nominated by Konrad Adenauer’s family through the second generation, two by the federal government, and one by the federal president, who normally nominates a representative from the opposition party. The board of trustees (an honorary office) is responsible for all fundamental questions regarding the foundation. The board appoints a board of governors that conducts the business affairs of the foundation, assisted by a full-time executive director. The mission of the foundation, according to the law of November, 30, 1978, is

- to preserve the memory of the statesman Konrad Adenauer... [his impact] on the freedom and unification of the German people, the European unification process, and reconciliation between the peoples; to contribute to the understanding of contemporary history and of the development of the Federal Republic of Germany; and to collect and preserve the public papers of Adenauer.

While Adenauer was still in office, an initiative began to establish an institution to preserve the Heidelberg birthplace of Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected German head of state. In 1960, the treasurer of the Social Democratic Party and vice-president of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation persuaded the city of Heidelberg to arrange for a small memorial in the apartment where Ebert was born. This was co-sponsored by the state of Baden-Württemberg and the office of the federal president. The memorial was opened to the public in 1962 by President Lübke himself.2
The next organizational steps would take twenty years, however. The example of the foundation established for Adenauer in 1978 played a role in the process of establishing a similar foundation in honor of Ebert, a Social Democrat. The city of Heidelberg bought the property in 1983, and the process was accelerated when Federal President von Weizsäcker met with Minister President Späth of Baden-Württemberg, Social Democratic Party Leader Willy Brandt, and President of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Kühn.  

In Ebert’s case, a private promotional association was created, rather than a dependent foundation regulated by civil law, as in the early phase of the Adenauer memorial. This association was the predecessor to a federal foundation, established in December 1986 by the West German parliament. As with Adenauer’s memorial foundation, this law was passed by all the “old” parties: CDU/CSU, SPD, and FDP; only the new Green Party resisted. For the Greens, Friedrich Ebert was no shining example of democracy for the German people because of his role in the suppression of the revolution of 1918–19. But the great majority of the Bundestag honored the first democratically elected president of the Weimar Republic, who strengthened parliamentarianism in Germany. The foundation “Reichspräsident Friedrich-Ebert-Gedenkstätte” opened its doors in February 1989 in the presence of Federal President von Weizsäcker. Johannes Rau was the first president of its board of trustees until he became federal president.

The Ebert memorial foundation was modeled on Adenauer’s, although there are several differences. With regard to the board of trustees, the state of Baden-Württemberg and the city of Heidelberg each have the right to nominate one member. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation also nominates one member to the board of trustees and the board of governors. The Ebert memorial holds no personal papers because they were destroyed during Word War II. For that reason, political education is much more central than in Adenauer’s foundation.

Since reunification, three further memorial foundations on the federal level have been established: the Willy Brandt Foundation, the Theodor Heuss Foundation, and the Otto von Bismarck Foundation. The bills to establish these foundations were debated in parliamentary committees nearly simultaneously. However, for political and organizational reasons, they opened their doors at different times between 1994 and 1997.

The first of the three to come into being was the Willy Brandt Foundation in Berlin. When Brandt died in October 1992, his widow Brigitte Seebacher-Brandt, Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and the Social Democratic Party joined together to promote a memorial foundation. The other political parties agreed. After intense discussions about Brandt’s personal papers, a complex solution was found, combining federal law with a civil
contract. Brandt’s personal papers remained in the Ebert foundation, which also houses the Archives of German Social Democracy, as well as trade union archives. A special Willy Brandt archive was established within the institution. Its advisory board was made identical to the board of trustees of the newly constituted federal memorial foundation devoted to Willy Brandt. The board’s first president was retired Federal President Walter Scheel, who had been Brandt’s foreign minister. The current president is Wolfgang Thierse, President of the German Bundestag. With the exception of the unique set-up of the archive and the fact that the Ebert foundation nominates one member to the board of trustees and one to the board of governors, the Brandt foundation is constituted like the Adenauer and Ebert memorial foundations.

The Brandt memorial foundation makes special reference to his efforts for a North/South dialogue. A permanent historical exhibition was opened to the public in 1997, and the memorial foundation supports research related to the Willy Brandt Archives in Bonn. There are plans to set up a branch in Brandt’s home town, Lübeck.

The establishment of the other two memorial foundations took longer and followed very different courses. The federal law establishing the foundation devoted to the Federal Republic of Germany’s first president, Theodor Heuss, was unanimously approved by the Bundestag in May 1994. By contrast, vehement debates regarding a foundation for the “Iron Chancellor” Otto von Bismarck occurred before a law finally passed establishing one in June 1997.

The Federal President Theodor Heuss House Foundation is located in the house in Stuttgart where Heuss died in 1963. From 1964 to 1971, the Theodor Heuss Archives were housed there in a foundation under civil law, like the American presidential libraries. Heinrich Lübke was the president of the board of trustees. The Heuss archives thus existed before the Adenauer memorial foundation was constituted. But this first attempt to make his personal papers public failed for a number of reasons. As a result, Heuss’s papers were divided between the Federal Archives in Koblenz, the Archives of German Literature in Marbach, and the Heuss family.

Heuss’s personal papers can now be used for research on microfilm in the new foundation, which opened to the public in 2002. With Lord Ralf Dahrendorf as president of its board of trustees, the Heuss foundation has the mission to preserve the memory of the first president of the Federal Republic of Germany. Although the Heuss foundation is structurally constituted like the other foundations, it is oriented more towards political education and outreach.

The Otto von Bismarck Foundation is in many ways an exception. It is the only foundation devoted to an imperial German politician and the
only one dedicated to a monarchist rather than a democrat. Moreover, Bismarck was a figure at variance with the Social Democrats and the Catholic Church. The SPD, PDS, and the Green Party all voted against establishing the memorial foundation.

When the other foundations were established, the leaders of the parties in the Bundestag had reached an agreement beforehand, and the bills passed the parliamentary committees and the plenum with little debate. In Bismarck’s case, it began the same way. But after some discussion in the press over whether Bismarck should be honored in this way in a democratic society, a public debate arose. Chancellor Kohl and the parties in power (CDU/CSU and FDP) stressed Bismarck’s importance for the unification of Germany in 1871, and they brought the bill through parliament. Gerhard Stoltenberg became the first president of the board of trustees in January 1998, and the SPD also sent a representative to the board. Henry Kissinger became a member of the advisory board. As a result of the criticism expressed in the public debate, the foundation’s mission was formulated very generally and defensively: to preserve the memory of Otto von Bismarck, to collect and administer his papers, which remain the property of the family, and to evaluate the papers for the public.

In comparing German memorial foundations and American presidential libraries, it is important to distinguish between these small German memorial foundations, the foundations that are specifically devoted to the history of National Socialism and the GDR and the large foundations of the various German political parties. Regulated by civil law, the large political foundations are responsible for the historical heritage of the political parties and therefore compete to a certain extent with the Federal Archives for the personal papers of politicians. They include the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (CDU) in Berlin and St. Augustin, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (SPD) in Berlin and Bonn, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FDP) in Potsdam and Gummersbach, the Heinrich Böll Foundation (Green Party) in Berlin, and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (PDS) in Berlin. These political foundations (which also receive public funds) have worldwide socio-political activities, maintain archives and libraries, and have much larger staff than the memorial foundations; the largest, the Friedrich Ebert foundation, has nearly 600 employees. Memorial foundations usually have no more than ten to twelve staff members.

Both the German memorial foundations and American presidential libraries are based upon the conviction that the general public can more easily appreciate historical processes through the impressive examples of important politicians. The U.S. presidential libraries were a model for the Konrad Adenauer House in Rhöndorf, which in turn was a model for the
other four memorial foundations. But apart from the scale, there are several differences between these American and German institutions. German memorial foundations are financed fully by public means, whereas U.S. presidential libraries are overwhelmingly funded by private sources. American presidential libraries are part of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), while each German memorial foundation is legally independent (but financially dependent on the federal budget). They are subject to oversight by the ministry, but they are not part of the German Federal Archives.

Like the presidential libraries, German memorial foundations present permanent exhibitions, publish scholarly books (usually a politician’s collected works and correspondence) and occasional papers, and organize seminars and conferences. But with respect to archival holdings there is a great difference. In the United States, all presidents’ personal papers and other historical materials since 1929 (i.e., since President Hoover) have been collected in presidential libraries. In Germany, the situation is very different. Only two of eleven heads of state from the Weimar Republic and the Federal Republic (Ebert and Heuss), and only two out of nineteen heads of government (Adenauer and Brandt), have memorial foundations.

Only one German memorial foundation possesses the papers of the politician to whom it is devoted, namely the Adenauer foundation. The Bismarck foundation holds his papers on indefinite loan from the family; the Heuss foundation has microfilm of the widely dispersed materials; the Brandt foundation has only some papers with the rest held by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation; Ebert’s papers are nearly totally lost. The personal papers of German heads of state and heads of government are held in a variety of places: the Federal Archives, the archives of political foundations, city archives, private holdings, and even foreign archives.

In conclusion, the current German memorial foundations are the result of a very deliberate, selective process which was (and still is) dependent on German political culture and especially its political parties. Efforts to establish memorial foundations for the most important chancellors of the post-World War II era (Adenauer and Brandt) and the first president of the FRG (Heuss) began after their deaths rather than after their retirements, as in the case of American presidential libraries. The latter would be impossible in Germany. In their early phases, the Adenauer and Heuss memorial foundations were created under civil law rather than public law. It was thus not difficult to achieve the consent of all parties. Once the first institution had been established, the other political parties also sought memorial foundations for politicians from their ranks. When foundations for Adenauer and Ebert existed, it seemed as if the consent of the Christian Democrats to create the Brandt foundation
implied the consent of the Social Democrats to a second foundation for a conservative politician. This was the background to the establishment of the Bismarck foundation, which Kohl was especially eager to set up because he regarded himself as Bismarck’s successor with respect to German unification. And, of course, the Liberals also wanted a memorial foundation, the Heuss foundation. The model for these small but important German foundations was the American presidential libraries, but it was altered to fit the conditions of German political culture.

Notes

1 This paper is based upon the following materials: archival sources in the Konrad Adenauer House in Rhöndorf and the Archives of Social Democracy of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Bonn; information given by the executive directors and archivists of the various federal foundations on the basis of a survey; the web sites of the various federal foundations and presidential libraries; and, finally, the author’s own experiences as head of the History Research Center of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and as a member of the History Commission of the Social Democratic Party since the 1980s and as a member of the federal foundations devoted to Friedrich Ebert and Willy Brandt from their beginnings to the present.


3 See Ulrike Andersson et al., Reichspräsident-Friedrich-Ebert-Gedenkstätte Heidelberg (Braunschweig, 1989).

4 See the text of the law in Bundesgesetzblatt, December 19, 1986, 2553ff.

5 The Grün-Alternative Liste Heidelberg distributed a leaflet entitled “Warum gerade Ebert heute?” [Why Honor Ebert Now?].


7 See Ulrike Puvogel, ed., Gedenkstätten für die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus (Bonn, 1988).