

## Editorial

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# Von der Wende zur Zeitenwende – A Turning Point to the Turning of the Times

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The aim in preparing this special issue focused on the political events of 1989 and their aftermath was to record the experiences of contemporary witnesses to these times, which risked being lost if they were not soon recorded in print. Initially, the focus was to be on German developments. However, Elmar Mittler and Konrad Umlauf soon realised that German experiences were closely linked to wider European developments.

During an online conversation one morning during the cold days of February 2023, Elmar Mittler and Ann Matheson, two people who had experienced and helped to shape the period of change on a European basis, were reflecting on this optimistic time in the history of Europe, as it felt to many living through this time, with borders opening, fresh connections being forged, and with new technological tools to assist. The longer the conversation went on, the more important it seemed to be to leave a record of this period, as it was experienced by those working in libraries in different countries across Europe.

It turned out that many fellow travellers of that time were also willing to participate in contributing their recollections, and younger colleagues for whom the actual events of 1989 are already virtually history, gladly agreed to add their perspectives. The results that can be presented here, in this special issue, focused on “The Turning Point to the Turning of the Times”, have exceeded our initial expectations by far. Together, they offer a wide range of essays from across Europe, with thirty-six articles from twenty European countries in all: Armenia, Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, the UK, and Ukraine.

European library developments over this period show a very broad spectrum of experiences. Many are characterised by a sense of starting off on a new journey, of new

beginnings and new connections. Europe had a new shape and the opening up of borders brought the prospect for researchers of access to previously little-known collections and for libraries a seemingly infinite scope for co-operation. There were acute financial pressures though and gigantic adjustments and transitions had to be made. It was also a time when technology expanded the capacity of libraries to connect better with their societies and citizens; and for research libraries to serve researchers better.

The articles in this special issue have been broadly geographically grouped, as those relating to libraries in Germany, those relating to countries in Central and Eastern Europe, those covering countries in Southern Europe, those relating to countries in Western Europe, and, finally, a glance at the future horizons for libraries looking forward from 2024.

The essay by Professor Esko Häkli, Director of the then Helsinki University Library, a key figure bridging library development between East and West at the time, is a fitting introduction to this special issue. Renate Gömpel’s contribution<sup>1</sup> on the Conference of European National Librarians (CENL), Ann Matheson’s on the changes in the UK and Europe and Giuseppe Vitiello’s on the Council of Europe ably complement it.

In the transitions of these times, the reunification in Germany played a central role. The German experience from different perspectives is covered in a number of articles. With the benefit of Western planning experience and funding structures, it was possible to bring university libraries up to international standards impressively quickly. Public libraries had to cope with radical change from a centrally to an almost exclusively locally-funded system, but here, too, it was an admirable achievement that the transition led to a reorganised and reasonably comprehensive service, which meets the profoundly changed requirements of users.

The sense of beginning a new journey is particularly strong in the countries of the former Eastern bloc. Enthusi-

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<sup>1</sup> An English version of this article is available at [https://www.cenl.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Gompel\\_CENL\\_Europes\\_national-libraries.pdf](https://www.cenl.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Gompel_CENL_Europes_national-libraries.pdf).

asm about the new opportunities to get to know one another and the joy of being able to co-operatively shape a common future can also be observed though in a similar way in all countries. An openness to contacts and co-operation had taken hold in European libraries.

Most countries in today's Central and Eastern Europe were able to overcome the severe economic slumps that were experienced during the harsh transition from a planned economy to a free market. Those countries that were soon to become members, or at least candidates for membership of the European Union, had an advantage. They were able to take part in co-operative projects that significantly advanced the transformation of libraries to the digital age. However, most countries also made impressively rapid progress on their own, particularly in the use of new digital technologies. At all levels – local, national, and international – the new opportunities for co-operation were of crucial importance.

In countries in Southern Europe, there were financial hardships too, and there were also internal political and economic considerations, which were their main priority at the time, and so while libraries fully supported the changes, they did not experience the same sense of these events as a pivotal moment. Here technological developments were the decisive turning point, with wider European political changes hardly playing a role, as can be seen from the articles from Italy, Greece, and Turkey.

In countries in the West, the development of IT in libraries was also a significant turning point, particularly as it accelerated from the late 1980s onwards, with much of the early impetus coming from the United States. Some countries like the UK had experienced a turning point in the 1980s, with libraries expected to change in a significant way. Western libraries had advantages of technology, structures, and generally the active backing of the public, but they too were subject to government fluctuations in funding support and had to adapt.

In many ways, the record of libraries during this period has been a success story. A remarkable number of new library buildings have become landmarks for nations, universities, and cities, and, at the same time, libraries have

provided new services for fast-changing demands. The political developments in the late 1980s and early 1990s opened up Europe and gave a new dimension, laying the foundations for the connections among libraries across Europe that have flourished over these thirty years, and the resources of professional expertise and human values that we have absorbed from one another. The other important architects have been technology and the European Commission and its programmes. Access to European cultural heritage has been broadened through networked databases including the Heritage of the Printed Book (HPB) and Europeana; and co-operative digitisation can even offer an emergency solution for endangered national treasures in time of war.

It is clear though that in some European countries still, libraries are having to cope with very difficult quandaries and some governments are yet to be convinced of the intellectual, cultural, health and economic benefits of a well-developed library system. More still needs to be achieved.

A glance at the future for libraries looking forward from 2024 completes the special issue. We see a different world in front of us in 2024 and, as always in their history, libraries will face new issues, some of them already visible, as shown in the article on algorithms from Finland, but some still unseen. Where will trust fit in the world of the future? The article from Denmark points us in this direction. How shall we retain the pleasurable experiences of our cultural history in a digital world is a question raised in the contribution from Serbia? Let us trust that libraries will be able to tackle the pitfalls of the future as they have those of the past, with innovation, co-operation, and the essential values of humanity.

We thank all the contributors for creating this record of a very special time in the history of Europe and in the history of its libraries. Warm thanks are also due to Editor-in-Chief Jens Mittelbach, who has played a very important part in achieving our goal.

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