

Cologne, Germany: Who is responsible for the collapse of the municipal archive building?

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On Tuesday, March 3, at about 2 p.m., the six-story state archive building in Cologne collapsed on itself in a matter of seconds and disappeared into a giant cavity under its base, pulling some neighbouring buildings down with it. It is still not clear whether anyone was killed or injured and, if so, how many. Employees and visitors to the archive were able to get out of the building in time.

Up to now, two residents of the dwellings in the immediate area have been reported missing. There could have been many more casualties. Cologne's Severinstraße, on which the building stood, is a lively inner-city shopping street and there is an old people's home and a secondary school immediately opposite. Residents were evacuated from the area 150 meters from the centre. They are in shock and full of fear that there could be further building collapses.

Only a few days before, thousands of people took part in the Cologne Carnival procession that passed through the street. Had the building collapsed on this day, there would have been far more casualties. And had there been survivors under the rubble, it would have been practically impossible to rescue them.

The value of the loss of the irreplaceable archive is incalculable. Crucial original documents concerning politics, legal records, property rights, economic and social documents—most of them are almost certainly lost forever.

In this particular archive in Cologne there were not only highly valuable documents about the development of the city, but also unique historical manuscripts, records and documents concerning the history of Europe as a whole, dating from about the year 900 up to the present. Many of these significant cultural records were rescued only with the greatest efforts and difficulty during the upheavals of the Second World War.

The archive also contained minutes of town council meetings since 1376 along with the so-called *Schreinszeugnisse* (burial records). These are records that are regarded as documenting the original developments in European legal history. The *Erzstift und Kurfürstentum Köln*, also called the *Kurköln*, (the founding "chapter" of the Cologne Electorate), was one of the original seven electorates forming the German nation under the Holy Roman Empire, and the city of Cologne played an

important role in German and European history.

Valuable manuscripts from the philosopher and theologian Albertus Magnus (1200-1280) were stored in the city archive, along with records from all the secularized monasteries of the city, papal missives, trade agreements and diplomatic legation records. Most of these documents consist of paper-thin parchments. Even if they should be found, most will be likely not be restorable.

The city archive also housed invaluable recent items—personal literary collections from the writings of famous architects (Gerhard Böhm, Wilhelm Riephahn), politicians (Konrad Adenauer), composer Jacques Offenbach, media philosopher Vilém Flusser and those from writers like Dieter Wellershoff or Heinrich Böll.

Also included was the personal literary correspondence of Hans Mayer, a native of Cologne and a literature specialist, who corresponded with many important authors and poets: among others, Thomas Mann, Paul Celan and Günter Grass. These documents were donated to the archive during the lifetimes of these authors. The literary legacy from Böll was acquired from his inheritors by the city archive, after a long period of negotiation, for €800,000 at the beginning of this year.

Last but not least, the Cologne city archive was home to the Karl Marx's editorial records from the *Rheinischen Zeitung*. The *Rheinische Zeitung für Politik, Handel und Gewerbe* (Rhine newspaper for politics, trade and business) was founded on January 1, 1842 in Cologne, and was banned at the end of March the following year by the state authorities. The newspaper was the mouthpiece of the progressive bourgeoisie and took a stand against the Prussian government.

Marx began his activities there with a series of articles called "On Freedom of the Press." In these, Marx wrote a sentence that has lost no relevance for today: "The primary freedom of the press lies in not being a trade," in which he polemicised against those who wanted to subordinate press freedom to business interests.

The city archive was considered to be a leading model for archive design. It was constructed to be very stable and provided the ideal conditions for document storage through its air conditioning system and heating system for a carefully

controlled temperature between 15 and 18 degrees centigrade. The irreplaceable original documents were stored in about 18 kilometers of shelving, and included 65,000 original records, more than 104,000 maps and plans, 50,000 bills and posters and a million photographs. The insurance valuation of these was set at €400 million, but their true worth is not financially measurable.

Reckless underground building works

A new underground railway line is currently being built under the Severinstraße. A 28-metre-deep tunnel, creating a massive hollow space immediately under the city archive, is being dug, in order to connect two branches of the current underground system. A huge stream of water and mud flowed into this artificial cavern.

Because of this, the city archive literally "fell through the floor," causing the otherwise sturdy building, built in 1971, to topple over. The federal state prosecution has initiated an investigation against persons unknown for "endangering the safety of a building and negligent injury."

The city council and public transportation services authorities in Cologne have nevertheless rejected all accusations that they have not responded appropriately to the damage caused since the building of the new underground works began.

During the underground tunnel works in 2007, residents had already reported considerable cracks in the walls and floors of their homes. A damage assessor confirmed their existence, but reported them as "statistically irrelevant,"

A second opinion from another expert, who was consulted by the residents, declared the residential homes basically safe. After city archive staff confirmed significant cracks in the cellar, these too were classified as acceptable.

But already in 2004, the enormous church tower of the St. John the Baptist church had been caused to lean drastically by the underground tunnel works and had to be pulled down. Furthermore, countless other historical buildings in the former Roman city, including the historic town hall, have sunk into the ground or have lost some of their ceiling coverings.

The construction of the new north-south underground line, which is being extended for kilometres under residential areas, was hotly disputed for years in Cologne. This was not only because the city is built on quicksand and river pebble foundations, but also on centuries-old cultural remains. There is absolutely no firm geological foundation under the city, let alone firm rock bases. Before the medieval city was extended, the banks of the River Rhine were situated in exactly the place where the current construction work is taking place. Again and again, as construction proceeds, ever more giant cavities and old vaults are exposed, some of which have to be filled in with

building rubble.

For this reason, there was a real concern that additional underground construction work would lead to serious problems. There could have been at least three perfectly sensible and less expensive solutions to resolve the urgent public transport needs, but local politicians postponed decisions on them for years.

The city of Cologne and many of its local councillors are notorious for their irresponsibility, carelessness and susceptibility to corruption. There have been countless construction scandals, in which corruption played, or is playing, a role. To give one example, presently there is a very dubious business transaction, worth millions, having to do with the expansion of the Cologne exhibition centre. And the shady origins of the recycling system in Cologne, in which politicians were involved, have surfaced in press reports again and again in recent years and decades.

After city hall personnel changed, the expensive underground railway development project was suddenly given priority. But as soon as the first holes for the new tunnel were dug in 2003, the first damages to buildings were reported. Despite that, the construction was allowed to proceed.

The mayor of Cologne, Fritz Schramma (Christian Democratic Union), whose party has pushed through the project, expressed sudden doubts after the recent collapses as to whether it could continue, but retracted his statement the next day. In the meantime, there is political consensus that the construction of the subway line should be completed.

Jürgen Roters, joint mayoral candidate for the Social Democratic Party and the Greens in the forthcoming local government elections on August 30, maintains that discontinuing the construction work in view of the already incurred costs "would be unacceptable." In 2002, Roters was the president of the city council, and gave permission for Schramma to start the project.



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