

First Year Report
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Executive Summary

The past year and change has been incredible, overwhelming, mystifying, and altogether fantastic. It's with anticipation and a tinge of sadness that I look forward to the next year in Germany. I have taken a bit of an "unconventional" approach to the Olmsted Program, although there are abiding arguments that no approach is actually conventional. I have not been enrolled at the Technical University of Dresden (as outlined in my Registration Report), which has been disappointing as it has precluded me from receiving the "formalized" education inherent in pursuit of a Master's Degree, but it has also been liberating on so many fronts. I have been able to study History, Political Science, and International Relations because I am not bound to the rigid educational structure of the German university system.

While the administrative portion of this report will certainly be shorter, I want to use this as an opportunity to expound on my goals for my last year as an active Olmsted Scholar, and to reflect on what I've learned about Germany and its people.



Academic Life at the Technische Universität Dresden (Technical University of Dresden)

As described on last year's Registration Report, I was unable to formally enroll at the Technical University of Dresden. Fortunately, the university has an outstanding opportunity where one can enroll as a *Gasthörer* or a "guest listener." In short, this means that one can take up to six courses of their choice and participate fully with the exception of being graded. One of my professors, Professor Alexander Kästner, however, agreed to grade my papers and participation as if I was a formal student (it was to be an enlightening experience).



First Day of Classes in Dresden!

The German university system is nothing short of mind-boggling. Students can and are expected to, formulate their own course of study within a specific discipline. As one is required to transition from their Bachelor course of study to a Master course of study without changing their original *Hauptfach*, or major, my discipline or "*Fakultät*" was history. I quickly learned that the subjects I had previously studied, and continue to be interested in, are non-existent within the curriculum. Specifically, the 20th century. As many of my German friends have explained to me, they spend their formative years being inundated with "*die Deutsche Schuld*," or "the German guilt," regarding the atrocities committed by the Nazi Party. By the time they reach university, the proverbial dead horse is well and soundly beaten, and students' courses of study have a tendency to branch off into disciplines from the ancient to the wildly eccentric. I decided to average the two and spent my first semester at TU Dresden studying Eastern Germany under Soviet influence (with one course regarding the Peasant's War of 1600 thrown in for good measure).

My first semester courses were all in German, and were as follows:

Übungen und Lektürekurse: Neue Ansätze der Geschichtswissenschaft

This was a very interesting class as the professor allowed us to write our own syllabus and determine the course of study on which we wanted to embark. As a class, we chose to develop a curriculum based on modern methods of historiography. We studied different texts, both in German and in English, and discussed in class ways to apply historiographical lenses to the texts (i.e. text analysis through religion, gender, socioeconomics, etc.). While I was not receiving formal grades, I was able to conduct several oral “interviews” with the professor after class to evaluate my understanding and comprehension of that week’s discussions.

MA Proseminare: Lebensreform um 1900

This was by far and away the most difficult course during the Winter Semester. The German was at a level with which I really struggled, and the conceptual analysis required by the professor was intense. We focused on reforms in Saxony, both political and cultural, at the turn of the century and bolstered our in-class instruction with very informative field trips in and around Dresden. I also made one of my closest friends in this class and she was able to help me for the rest of the semester to understand the basic gist of this class and the assigned weekly readings. Students had to give a 30-45 minute presentation on a specific aspect of 1900 reform for their semester evaluation and mine focused on religion and the importance of the church (and Church) in turn-of-the-century Saxony.

Seminare/Hauptseminare: Sachsen in der SBZ/DDR

This course was advertised as an in-depth analysis of Saxony’s (very interesting and unique) role within the DDR and unfortunately was practically manifested as student presentations on the subject. In theory good, it was during this course that I realized that German students often do not attend classes unless they are giving a presentation or they are personally invested; as a result, I was one of about three students that attended every class to listen to the presentations!

Einführendes Proseminare: Der deutsche Bauernkrieg

Taking part in a Bachelor level course was very interesting as I was able to compare the differences between Masters and Bachelors classes. The differences were striking, and this particular class was organized very similarly to a Bachelor level class that one would find in the States. We studied the political and cultural influences leading to the “Peasants’ War of 1600;” but, unlike my Masters courses, this was a course focusing more on facts, dates, and names, than the application of historical methods and interpretation or analysis of texts. I wrote two papers for this class to summarize and compare two political texts written about the Peasants’ War.

After my first semester, I was forced to take a very hard look at my current state of education. I was, in a word, bored. I desperately wanted my courses to be interesting, but compounded with the relatively high-brow, esoteric German being used in the courses, I was experiencing the sinking feeling that I was learning “dusty” information. My lofty ideals of getting a grasp on the current German political situation and Germany’s relationship to Europe, specifically Russia, were not being realized.

At this point, I sent a small manifesto to the Olmsted Foundation, outlining my current situation, and my planned “way-ahead.” Further proving that there is no “right way” to execute the Olmsted mission, the Foundation was extremely supportive. I highlighted my goals of

cultural and linguistic fluency, and pointed out that I was only achieving one half of that particular goal through my study of history.

But here was the rub: as mentioned before, the German system of education is rigid when it comes to determining academic trajectories (once one is on said trajectory it gets markedly more fluid in the stringency of its bureaucratic requirements). If I wanted to switch my major, therefore, I needed to wait until the Winter Semester (16/17), essentially stopping my University studies for the second semester of the academic year. This, however, did not turn out to be a hindrance, as I will outline later in the report.

Quality of Instruction

The quality of instruction at TU Dresden has certainly been diverse. In only one of my courses did I find a disappointing level of apathy between both the professor and the students. As mentioned previously, many of the students in my “Saxony in the DDR” class only came to give their presentation and receive their grade. I found this surprising, as well as the impression I received from the professor who did not appear to care too much about how many students were in class or what the ones in class were actually absorbing. However, the rest of my classes were fantastic.

I was, and continue to be, constantly surprised at the general level of knowledge amongst my fellow students. They have been specializing in a certain area of history since their high school education and are therefore impressively prepared at a fundamental level. This was at first intimidating, but I became more comfortable asking questions and speaking during class as the support from my professors and fellows was outstanding.

German grades are often based on one graded essay, exam, or presentation and therefore, about half of the six-month semester is spent in class and the other half is allocated for paper writing or presentations. Generally, students spend up to six years in Germany as a “professional student” and therefore, there seems to be a relatively casual approach to leaving a course or failing an exam. However, most of the students with whom I was studying either had to give a presentation or write an essay, and made it clear that these are particularly “hard-to-fail” tasks.

As a summary: TU Dresden is an elite university with respect to the hard sciences and research. It is not, by any means, an elite university as far as the humanities are concerned but I am learning a lot, making lots of friends, and have become privy to a fairly cloistered community of Eastern German academics. As mentioned previously, acceptance into the university has been a fairly difficult hurdle to overcome, but I think I have found an acceptable balance between finding classes in which I am interested and achieving my goals as an Olmsted Scholar. It was at first some tough medicine to take when I realized that I was most likely not going to get a Master’s degree. However, it was through this realization that I began to understand that the “Olmsted Experience” is not comparative. Every person has their own approach and therefore, outcome, from their time in-country and I am very excited to continue on my current road towards fluency not only in the German language, but also in the unique culture and politics found here.

Continuing Language Instruction

As mentioned previously, not being a formal student has allowed me to explore lots of different avenues within in the framework of my German education. I have taken a four-week C1 course and it was extremely helpful. While my German instruction at DLI in Washington D.C. was unparalleled, I still felt rather uncomfortable in Masters level courses (to be honest, I still do – if I don't concentrate completely I will miss a large percentage of what is covered!) and in negotiations for apartment contracts, etc. Since my course, I have made a concerted effort to attend as many events as possible and to only chat in German with my friends and I have definitely seen an improvement in my "street-German." It doesn't sound like a swallowed textbook anymore, but I am still working on my general cadence when I speak!

I have also enrolled in a Russian course for several reasons. I became comfortable being uncomfortable with my German and I think this led to a certain amount of complacency. I can live as easily in Germany as I can in the U.S., and I decided it was high time for an intellectual shakeup. My German is by no means fluent, but it can become easy to be discouraged or intimidated by taking the next "big-step" in a linguistic journey towards fluency. My Russian course is in German and that serves very nicely to shake up any version of equilibrium that has been established in my brain!

Dresden is arguably the last bastion of "The East" and hearing Russian is a daily occurrence. Especially with the current political situation, I decided that taking a Russian course would do nothing but expand my horizons in understanding this unique part of the world. As I am writing this I have not yet started my course and so I look forward to sharing in my next report how it went!

Housing

After initially struggling to secure housing, I can truly say that I could not have picked a better place to live. I am living in the Neustadt in Dresden and am perfectly situated. As mentioned in my last report, Neustadt is the area where students would choose to live if it was affordable on the average student budget. As a result, my apartment has become a gathering spot for many of my friends and it has given me a real opportunity to host and meet people to whom I normally never would have been exposed. Neustadt is the hive of hipster-dom in Dresden and the neighborhood never ceases to entertain!

Security/Anti-terrorism

Security in my building is good, and I have experienced nothing resembling any security breaches or anti-American sentiment.

Foreign Cultural Observations

The academic and administrative part of my life has been interesting and certainly illuminating, but this is where I have learned the most. My observations and thoughts about this particular subject could fill a book, but I'll spare the reader my normal rambling about Germany and keep my observations as succinct as possible. Suffice it to say, this experience has changed or influenced every aspect in which I view the world. Germany, while "Western

Europe” is so different from what we normally experience as Americans, and the German mentality never ceases to amaze and sometimes confuse me!

I will start with the student culture here. I have been impressed with the general political knowledge of most university students here in Dresden, and everyone seems to be very well informed if not personally politically active. Dresden is unfortunately the home of PEGIDA (*Patriotische Europäischer gegen die Islamisation des Abendlandes*), a far right-wing component of society vying for political legitimacy and hosting a bevy of neo-Nazis and political extremists. Students, and most residents, in Dresden have nothing but unreserved hatred for PEGIDA and the counter-protests have picked up enough momentum here to be successful in quelling the tide of PEGIDA protestors that come to Dresden every Monday. However, the attitude of “extreme tolerance” tends to pervade every conversation one has with students in Dresden, and it certainly makes for some very interesting conversations. I could expound *ad nauseum* on the conflict between Germany’s need to tolerate everyone and a very real fear of anything or anyone “foreign,” but I’ll reserve those thoughts until the next Olmsted reunion!

On another political note, my impressions have been influenced by the upcoming elections in the U.S. When I first moved here, most of the questions directed my way were about either Ukraine or Syria and the hand that the U.S. has played in several other world conflicts; not least of which, my opinion as an American about German-Russian economic and social interdependence. These questions have all but disappeared and have been replaced with “is Trump going to be your new President?”

As far as impressions outside of the political sphere, I don’t know where to begin. Most of my free time in Germany is spent outdoors in “The Nature.” *Die Natur* in Germany is sacred, and most Germans spend as much time outdoors as possible. But I have been struck repeatedly by how...regulated...German nature is. Wild camping is highly illegal here and in Austria, and wandering from marked paths will result in fines. It has been a fascinating experience hiking and cycling with Germans and experiencing the caution with which they approach outdoor ventures.



Spending Time in The Nature

Requiring mention as well is the Dresden sports culture. Like everywhere in Germany, football is revered, but there is something really special about Dresden. Dynamo Dresden was the premier football team in the GDR and the pride in their team they felt then still echoes

today. Dynamo recently moved up to the *Zweites Bundesliga* and it gets crazy! Games are wild and “typically Eastern German.” Dresden also has a solid fan base for the local hockey team: The Dresden Ice Lions (*Dresdner Eislöwen*). While I find the football games entertaining, these hockey games are where I spend most of my time watching sports. I love the atmosphere and the passion at all the games!

Whether it’s biking everywhere, barbequing on the riverbank, layering clothes in a way that seems to continue to be elusive to me, not crossing the street against the light, ensuring *sotto voce* conversations on the tram, or acknowledging that Saxony is actually the best *Bundesland*, I have adopted several cultural idiosyncrasies that only become apparent to me when I travel outside of Dresden or Germany.

I have attended operas, concerts in the various churches, film nights on the Elbe, public viewings of football games, festivals, and sporting events. The sense of community in Dresden is unparalleled and I would be lying if I said the thought of leaving didn’t make me anxious. I have certainly had my fair share of personality conflicts with Germany, but it has become a home and I would not trade living in Dresden for anything!



Just a Typical Hockey Game!

Community Involvement

I’ve participated in several community events and have joined a couple of clubs over the last several months. I participate in a couple of local meetings called *Stammtisch* (meaning a regular meeting at a pub) where the focus is allowing groups of German learners to converse with native speakers and share a couple of drinks (which helps immensely with loosening tongues!). I have met several very interesting people and we often will get together outside of *Stammtisch* as well. Every Sunday I also play fiddle and sing in an Americana/Bluegrass/Irish jam session at one of the local pubs. It’s a very diverse group of musicians and it’s been a great creative outlet as well as a fantastic source of wonderful friends!

In April, I participated in a Model UN and was the only native English speaker in the conference. I made several friends who are not all in Dresden, and it has given me the opportunity to travel for visits within Germany. I was invited back for next year’s conference to be a chair on the Disarmament and International Security Conference for which I am very excited!

I have also recently joined the *Laufgruppe* in Dresden, or the local running club, which meets twice a week. I am running the Florence marathon in November, and while the marathon is in Italy, being able to run with new friends in Germany has been great! Of course, we all gather after our runs at a pub for some advanced cellular repair therapy in the inimitable German style. As far as other athletic activities, I have been going on occasional rides with the cycling club, which has been eye opening. The running club is extremely casual and the atmosphere is very relaxed. Everyone in the cycling club is extraordinarily friendly but there is a level of intensity that I was not expecting. Next Spring, a small group of us are planning on cycling the *Elberadweg* that spans the entire length of the Elbe River. I am also chipping away at the *Malerweg*; a 116 kilometer hike through the National Park outside of Dresden that inspired many poets, painters, and musicians throughout the last 200 years – I hope to complete the entire hike by the end of September.

I attend Mass at the Catholic Church in Dresden, but as Eastern Germany is either largely agnostic or Protestant, it has been difficult meeting people my age at Church. I have recently, though one of my Bavarian friends learned that there is a group of Catholic students who meet during the school year and I am excited to potentially be involved with the group!

As far as my own personal community is concerned, I have started hosting pancake brunches on Sundays for many of my friends. Several have never tried American pancakes and it has become something of a tradition that I look forward to continuing during my time in Dresden. It also serves to bring different people from different parts of my life together – and it's always fun getting to make new introductions!



Enjoying Pancakes is Universal

As far as the future, community involvement is looking bright. I am partaking in a course at the Marshall Center for Strategic Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen and will be studying transnational organized crime. I am very interested in this particular subject and am looking forward to continuing to build my network within Europe.

Overseas Travel

In Germany, I have had the opportunity to travel extensively since my last report. I have traveled to over 15 more German cities and have had some outstanding experiences. I am looking forward to this year's Oktoberfest in Munich as I did not attend last year, and I am

excited about witnessing an *Almabtrieb* in which the cows are brought down from pasture in spectacular fashion. I have been skiing in Austria and Germany and am looking forward to working some hiking in the Austrian and German Alps towards the end of Fall this year! I also have plans to spend some more time in Northern Germany this year to include Rostock and Lübeck.

I have been able to travel to several places Italy and experience the Dolomites where German is the prevalent language. I am making plans to return, as it was such an incredible experience. I was also able to travel to Israel, which, having spent the last year in Germany, was a fascinating experience. In addition I have traveled to Croatia for the annual Olmsted Ladies' Trip, Slovenia, France, and Sweden. I am looking forward to extending some of my travels to the Baltic and the Balkan States. I recently read "Eastern Approaches" by Fitzroy Maclean and have been hankering to travel to the Balkan States to get a firmer handle on the complex relationships within former Yugoslavia and specifically their relations with Nazi Germany. I have several friends that I have made from the Baltic States as well, and after I have taken some months of Russian I am looking forward to visiting them and getting to witness firsthand some of the more strategically positioned countries between Russia and Germany.



Enjoying the Colosseum

Speaking of Russia – I am very excited to be traveling with the Sullivans (OSC '15, Prague) to visit Russia at the end of this month. It will not only be fascinating in terms of the history and the current political situation, but also the amazing culture and people about whom I have read so much!

Traveling during the Olmsted Program has been eye opening on several levels. I believe at first I was unconsciously subscribing to the "quantity" approach to travel. I now have been able to distinguish between "touring" and "traveling." Seeing the world as a traveler instead of a tourist requires work and more than a little patience. I have discovered that I infinitely prefer to spend some more time in a country and just get lost as opposed to "checking the boxes." It has also been illuminating how prevalent the German culture is throughout Europe – it's almost impossible to escape either the influence of German culture in many countries or countries that were once occupied. Germany's influence is indeed far reaching.



Lavender Fields in Provence

Contact with other Olmsted Scholars

I have been able to visit Jenn Floyd (OSC '14, Jerusalem) in Israel, which, as anyone has talked to me recently knows, was a life changing experience. Her knowledge and passion about her country was truly infectious. I also have been able to travel with Matt and Autumn Bryant (OSC '15, Florence) through the Dolomites where, with our powers combined, we spoke every local language! I have spent time with the Sullivans (OSC '15, Prague) and the Hogans (OSC '15, Izmir/Berlin) and have been able to travel extensively with the Bauses (OSC '15, Sofia).



I also was able to spend some time with Jenn Floyd and Melissa Dombrock (OSC '15, Rabat) in Rais Sanchez's (OSC '14, Lisbon) fantastic host country of Portugal. Getting together and sharing experiences was fantastic and fun!



Visitors to Dresden have included the Hollars (OSC '15, Gdansk), the Granholms (OSC '09, Freiburg), and the Bronders (OSC '14, Poznan). I have been very excited to be able to show people this amazing city – and visiting Scholars in their homes is always incredible.

Recommendations/Closing

I have almost no recommendations to the Foundation after this year in Germany. With the establishment of a robust social network, it is much easier to contact scholars and forge relationships with people who are not only currently in country, but former scholars working in Europe.

While this report was more of a reflection on my time over the last several months, I certainly hope it helps to illuminate some of the areas that can become confusing. I will say that one of my biggest “lessons learned” was the understanding that the Olmsted Experience is unique to each person. It is so important to find something that makes every day unique and special. It can be easy to fall into a routine but this program is finite. I have tried to find something each day that challenges me or intrigues me and it’s only through the Foundation that this is possible. As I turned in my registration report last year, Olmsted was the greatest thing to have ever happened to me. As I submit this report, I can say that this sentiment has only increased. I cannot wait to continue to meet people and share my experiences over the next year!

Mit freundlichen Grüßen!

