

"Europe's National Libraries – The Memory of the Continent"¹

Article on the early years of the Conference of European National Librarians (CENL) 1987 - 1993²

Summary: Since 1987, the Conference of European National Librarians (CENL) has been advocating for the interests of European national libraries, emphasizing their special role in preserving the continent's cultural heritage and ensuring its accessibility to all³. This article focuses on the early years, especially the period of change in Central and Eastern Europe, the East-West dialogue, and the resulting development of cooperation among European national libraries.

Klaus-Dieter Lehmann: "The reorganization of Europe after the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 was not only a political and economic project but also a cultural one. The opportunities for creative cross-border collaboration were a strong motivation for European national librarians, who had begun their closer cooperation in a joint conference in 1987.

They recognized that assuming a shared responsibility for the cultural and intellectual heritage and development, organizing free and unhindered access to knowledge, and making science public knowledge were prerequisites for a democratic Europe.

The 'Conference of European National Librarians', which brought together national libraries from East and West, provided the organizational structure. From the beginning, practical action defined the ambitious process of developing new tools for communication, networking, and storage. But it was also a time of new beginnings and confidence among like-minded individuals. They wanted to help shape the new Europe as a civil society force and not as a niche program.

This openness in thinking, along with the competence and responsibility of those involved, has led to decisions that have lasted well beyond the day. Bibliographic standards, UNIMARC, CoBRA, GABRIEL as a web portal for all European national

¹ Automatically translated and intellectually checked translation of Gömpel, Renate: „Europas Nationalbibliotheken – das Gedächtnis des Kontinents“. In: BIBLIOTHEK - Forschung und Praxis. 47 (2023) Sonderheft Von der Wendezeit zur Zeitenwende <https://doi.org/10.1515/bfp-2024-0042>
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² For the most part, unpublished meeting documents in the in-house archives of the German National Library were used as a source.

³ <https://www.cenl.org/about-cenl/>

libraries (46), The European Library, and Europeana are significant developments, some of which are still in use today."⁴

Inauguration in Lisbon

With the Single European Act (SEA), a European reform treaty was agreed upon in 1986 that extended the goal of European unification beyond the economic framework to other areas. It came into effect in mid-1987. Even before that, one of the newest partner countries, Portugal, which had joined the European Community in 1986 along with Spain, invited the directors of the Western European national libraries to a first meeting in Lisbon. With strong attention by the Portuguese media, the Secretary of State of the Portuguese Ministry of Culture welcomed the heads of 10 Western European national libraries on February 5th and 6th, 1987.⁵

From the very beginning, despite the diversity of interests, the focus was on community and the willingness to cooperate. Since its inception, the Conference of European National Librarians (CENL) has focused on improving services and preserving and safeguarding the cultural heritage of the continent. The opportunity for personal meetings was intended to discuss common problems, pool resources, and develop joint strategies.⁶ Each annual meeting also includes a significant social component, providing ample time to get to know one another as well as the cultural and social life of the host cities.

The early cooperation of national libraries and the conviction to achieve common goals through concrete steps helped in the European Community after the 1987 hearings for libraries and the draft "Action Plan for Libraries" presented in mid-1988 to develop specific cooperation considerations or project proposals from the national libraries of the member states.⁷ For example, right from the start, ideas such as the creation of national bibliographies on CD-ROM, the development of a Conspectus for Europe, the preservation of library materials in the mass conservation sector, or the machine-readable register of microform templates or surrogates within and between member states were in focus.⁸

Beyond the framework of the states united in the European Community, the national libraries of Europe were seen as crucial focal points for cooperation in the field of book

⁴ Klaus-Dieter Lehmann was Director General of Die Deutsche Bibliothek from 1988 - 1998 and Chairman of CENL from 1991 – 1997.

⁵ Hausmitteilungen der Deutschen Bibliothek, March 1987 (unpublished)

⁶ Gömpel, Renate: Europäische Nationalbibliotheken. In: Dialog mit Bibliotheken 9.1997,1, S. 20 - 22

⁷ Lehmann, Klaus-Dieter: Bibliotheken in der Europäischen Gemeinschaft. In: Dialog mit Bibliotheken 2.1990,2, S. 3 - 4

⁸ Hausmitteilungen der Deutschen Bibliothek, March 1987 (unpublished)

culture. Therefore, membership in the independent association of directors in CENL was tied to the membership of the respective state in the Council of Europe.

At the second European Library Summit on October 13th and 14th, 1988, directors from 16 national libraries gathered at the Deutsche Bibliothek⁹ (DB) in Frankfurt am Main. The discussion points were deepened, e.g. the networking of European national bibliographies through the use of information technologies and new technologies in national bibliographic services.

In the project to create national bibliographies on CD-ROM, realized by the British Library and the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the possibilities of using data from various libraries on a single CD-ROM were explored. The Deutsche Bibliothek had launched a new CD-ROM service in 1988 and wanted to participate in the proof of concept study along with the British Library and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Other national libraries also showed great interest in participating.¹⁰

There was also a willingness to cooperate in the development of a Conspectus for Europe for all national libraries and other leading libraries. It was agreed to hold a European Conspectus Conference as an informal meeting, as well as to conduct training programs for specialists and appoint Conspectus officers for each country.¹¹

Another key discussion point was the preservation and safeguarding of library materials through a European Register of Master Microforms, as well as measures to save historical book collections through conservation efforts and mass deacidification of new book collections endangered by acidic paper.

As a best practice example, the DB presented the project conducted with the support of the German Research Foundation and in collaboration with the Battelle Institute, which explored various methods for deacidifying large groups of books. Additionally, a symposium on the topic "Book Deterioration and Age-Resistant Paper" was reported on, attended by representatives from the book trade and the paper industry, during which the "Frankfurt Demands for the Use of Age-Resistant Papers in Book Production" were formulated..¹²

⁹ former name of the German National Library location in Frankfurt am Main

¹⁰ Dialog mit Bibliotheken 2.1990,1, S. 32 - 34

¹¹ Dialog mit Bibliotheken 1.1989,2, S. 50

¹² Dialog mit Bibliotheken 2.1989,2, S. 41 - 49

In 1989, the priorities were further advanced in Madrid. The collaboration with LIBER on the Conspectus for Europe project had progressed well and was to continue as a serious path for library cooperation in Europe.

For the "Action Plan for Libraries," there was a need for introductory workshops on handling the plan and training in IT application, particularly in Southern Europe. To identify projects, topics such as the Conspectus for Europe, the European Register for Master Microforms, CD-ROM for national bibliographies, and the retro-conversion of library catalogues were seen as recommendable, with expected results within a year.

The extension of legal deposit to new media was also intensely discussed, along with priorities for automation and the exchange of national bibliographic data records. All major libraries in Europe represented a distributed "European Library." It was to be determined how new technology could be best used to bring these libraries closer together. A procedure for handling the various MARC formats was required, and more attention was to be given to collaboration on authority data. There was a strong consensus that the major European library catalogues should be retro-converted¹³, as this was fundamental for the development of the "European Library" union catalogue.

For the first time in 1989, the political developments in Central and Eastern Europe were discussed, which led to the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1990 and the official dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991. It was agreed to send a letter to colleagues from Central and Eastern Europe and to consider when a joint special meeting could be convened, with Austria being considered as the host country.

In 1990 in Florence, the development of the European Action Plan for Libraries was again a major focus: The Action Plan was to become part of the third framework plan for research and development (1991-1994), an important point to consider for lobbying efforts, as significant emphasis was placed on developing an infrastructure to support research. Guidelines were issued, and a timeline was expected around mid-1991.¹⁴

Workshops on national bibliographies and retrospective cataloguing had taken place. A meeting on the feasibility of establishing a European Register of Master Microforms (EROMM) was held. A proposal for a one-year pilot project, to be hosted by the Bibliothèque nationale de France, was submitted.

¹³ Retrospektive Konversion in Europa : ein Überblick (1997), Table of contents: <https://d-nb.info/950610232/04>

¹⁴ Compare: Borchardt, Peter. "Neue Informationen zum Aktionsplan der Europäischen Gemeinschaft für die Bibliotheken in Europa" *Bibliotheksdienst*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1991 S.51-55.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/bd.1991.25.1.51>

The project on national bibliographies on CD-ROM had progressed well. In the discussions, there was consensus that this project represented the best type of library cooperation: it aimed at achieving standardization and delivering new products and services.

CENL particularly emphasized the importance of standards and shared bibliographic rules for data exchange. In this context, the European Commission wanted to finance a study on UNIMARC. The aim of the study was, among other things, to determine the feasibility of using UNIMARC in libraries, bibliographic institutions, and the book trade¹⁵; to document the means by which national formats could be replaced and converted into UNIMARC formats; and to establish among others the conditions under which UNIMARC could be used as a European standard format. Although the use of UNIMARC applications increased steadily over time, there was never a unified European application of UNIMARC, as a number of libraries used the USMARC format.¹⁶

Progress was made within the framework of the planned Conspectus for Europe¹⁷. The LIBER group, which dealt with the application of the methodology, had made some progress. The CENL subgroup, tasked with placing the Conspectus on the agenda of the European Action Plan for Libraries, was less successful.

For the first time, the topic of strategic planning was brought up for discussion. At that time, strategic plans were being developed at the National Library of Ireland and the Swiss National Library.

Regarding the relationship with the book trade, a recommendation for the use of age-resistant paper by the European Libraries and Publishers (ELP) working group was presented for discussion. The urgent need to establish an international standard for durable paper to preserve the printed word for future generations was recognized. CENL adopted the recommendation, thus giving significant weight to efforts to set and influence standards in this area.

Meanwhile, the Iron Curtain had fallen. CENL therefore placed special emphasis on developments in Central and Eastern Europe. Throughout 1990, initial contacts were made with colleagues in Eastern Europe and preliminary discussions took place. The

¹⁵ Henze, Volker: Durchführbarkeitsstudie zur Verwendung von UNIMARC beim Datenaustausch zwischen Nationalen Bibliotheken der EG, Bibliographischen Diensten und dem Buchhandel auf der Grundlage von deren gegenwärtiger Rechnerausstattung. In: Zeitschrift für Bibliothekswesen und Bibliographie 40.1993.3, S. 261-273

¹⁶ Gradmann, Stefan: MAB2, UNIMARC, USMARC: strategische Überlegungen zur Formatdiskussion. In: Zeitschrift für Bibliothekswesen und Bibliographie 42.1995.5, S. 481-489

¹⁷ Hafner, Ralph (2010): Automatisierung der Erwerbung auf der Grundlage des Conspectusverfahrens : ein Konzept. <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bsz:352-opus-119146>

situations in the individual countries varied greatly. To foster closer relationships, they were to be invited to join CENL as soon as their country became a member of the Council of Europe. Some countries, such as Hungary, had already been admitted to the Council of Europe in 1990. As a first step, a special meeting between CENL members and their Central and Eastern European colleagues was invited for the spring of 1991.

First East-West Conference 1991

The first East-West conference with Central and Eastern European national libraries took place from April 14 to 17, 1991, under the motto "East and West – European Dialogue between National Libraries" at the Austrian National Library in Vienna. The goal was to build closer connections and establish a defined partnership to tackle common challenges. With concrete results and agreed follow-up meetings leading to a continuous dialogue, the meeting was very successful.

A key discussion point was the role of national libraries and their relationships with each other. It was particularly emphasized how important it was for national libraries to take a leadership role and use every opportunity to present and voice themselves to official institutions, the government, etc., without overlooking the political situation. It was also clear that the national libraries of Central and Eastern Europe faced the important and difficult task of expressing their newfound self-confidence, convincing their respective governments of the need for specialists and automation technology, and securing a solid budget for all tasks.

Some of the Central and Eastern European libraries highlighted particularly challenging topics such as interlibrary loan and universal availability of publications, acquisition of books despite increased book prices, international book exchange, library automation, optimal use of national bibliographies, the need to develop new services, lack of financial support, the need for renovation and expansion projects (e.g., lack of space in the stacks), etc.

Possible solutions discussed included: convincing governments of the importance of cultural heritage for which the libraries are responsible; exploring opportunities for a more cost-effective acquisition policy and developing a national acquisition policy; advancing library automation, particularly for retroconversion projects, bibliography, online databases, CD-ROMs, as well as conservation and preservation of library materials.

The latter issue was proposed to fall under the responsibility of the IFLA Core Programme on Preservation and Conservation¹⁸. Rather than emphasizing new technologies, the focus was on exchanging experiences and conducting training to disseminate existing knowledge. Working groups were established for each topic to discuss further steps and financial possibilities.

East-West Dialogue and Collaboration

At the fifth annual meeting in Athens in October 1991, the General Directors of the National Libraries of Czechoslovakia and Hungary were able to participate as members of the Council of Europe.

From this point onward, the participation of the General Directors from the Central and Eastern European National Libraries was supported by a membership fee from countries with hard currency. Additionally, the Council of Europe supported participation by covering travel costs.

Further opportunities for mutual support were identified based on the needs of the Central and Eastern European National Libraries. The most pressing requirements they faced were highlighted by these libraries: funding for books, especially from abroad, information on modern library organization, support for a new definition of legal deposit and the role of national libraries to amend legislation and make the legal deposit more effective, special training courses, technical support (e.g., automation of libraries and of national bibliographies, access to machine-readable data, retro-conversion of catalogs, mass deacidification), and advice on public relations with governments and users.

Emergency aid programs aimed at implementing partnership projects in specific areas of collaboration were proposed. It was agreed that the key steps for establishing good cooperation involved exchanging invitations. This could involve colleagues from Central and Eastern European countries visiting Western libraries for several weeks to gain insights, or colleagues from Western countries spending several weeks in Central and Eastern European libraries to provide on-site practical support and organize seminars or practical training with specific content and goals.

In 1993, a significant number of Central and Eastern European countries participated in the CENL annual meeting for the first time, with 28 national libraries represented by their

¹⁸ From the IFLA Core Programmes: Annual report 1987 of the IFLA PAC Programme by the Programme Director, Merrily A. Smith. In: IFLA Journal 14.1988.2, S. 183 - 193
<https://doi.org/10.1177/034003528801400210>

directors^{19,20}. This led to an intense East-West dialogue and resulted in concrete aid and structural programs for Central and Eastern European national libraries. Agreements were made on visitor programs for experts, seminars, training courses, and the consolidation of isolated projects into larger initiatives.

Strategic considerations for the preservation and improved accessibility of the extensive book collections of European national libraries were a major focus of the meeting. Hans Rütimann, an advisor to the "US-Commission on Preservation and Access," was invited to report on ongoing activities in the United States related to conservation, mass deacidification, microfilming, digitization, and the use of age resistant paper. The participants expressed their support for a similar European commission. They emphasized that the collaboration of scientists, librarians, archivists, and political policymakers was the best foundation for a constructive approach to preserving cultural heritage. In March 1994, the "European Commission on Preservation and Access" was founded in Amsterdam as a non-profit organization.²¹

The necessity of expanding the European Register of Microfilm Masters (EROMM)²² project was highlighted for strategic considerations of collection preservation.

Another focus was the involvement of libraries in the European Commission's library support program. CENL successfully obtained a mandate from the Commission to independently design the action line for national bibliographic services. In coordination with Ariane Iljon, the Commission's representative from Luxembourg, a structure for a concerted action of the national libraries was formulated. Eight national libraries from the CENL membership were proposed for a steering and decision-making body (FORUM), which in turn established four working groups: Improving European Bibliographic Services, User Requirements for Bibliographic Products, Networked Data Distribution and Reuse, and Promoting the Shared Use of Data by Different National Bibliographic Services. This concerted action was named Computerized Bibliographic Record Actions (CoBRA).

¹⁹ Lehmann, Klaus-Dieter: Europas Bibliotheken im Dialog. In: Dialog mit Bibliotheken 6.1994,1, S. 3- 4

²⁰ The Council of Europe: guardian of Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law for 700 million citizens <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/home>>: With Estonia, Lithuania, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania, six Central and Eastern European countries were admitted to the Council of Europe in 1993, Bulgaria in 1992, Poland in 1991 and Hungary in 1990

²¹ Choosing to preserve: towards a cooperative strategy for long term access to the intellectual heritage ; papers of the international conference organized by the European Commission on Preservation and Access and Die Deutsche Bibliothek, Leipzig/Frankfurt am Main, March 29 – 30, 1996 (1997)

Table of contents: <https://d-nb.info/950604739/04>

²² https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Register_of_Microform_and_Digital_Masters:
<https://www.eromm.org/start>

The work of the four working groups led to nine proposals to the European Commission in the following year, of which four were intended as fully funded studies and five as projects with a 50:50 funding model focused on specific applications of bibliographic data. The studies targeted issues that national libraries must address regarding legal deposit and archiving of electronic publications, models for national bibliographic data, the provision of services in Europe, and the role of national libraries as network hubs. The projects included standardized file naming for data exchange, the application of UNIMARC in multinational databases, the creation of national authority files for personal names, the selection of bibliometric data from national bibliographic databases, and migration to UNICODE²³. All proposals and applications to the EU were endorsed by CENL. In a slightly different constellation, the work continued as CoBRA+ in three working groups.

The detailed work of CoBRA is not described here. However, through its work with the European Commission's funding programmes, it became increasingly clear that CENL needed to be given its own legal status. In 1998, eleven years after its establishment as an independent association of directors of European national libraries, CENL was established as a legal foundation under Dutch law.

Organization of the CENL Network

The independent association CENL was founded in 1987 with a first meeting of the Directors General of 10 national libraries. The first East-West Conference in 1991 brought together 32 Directors General and representatives, 14 of them from Central and Eastern European countries, European national libraries and major academic libraries from a total of 21 Council of Europe member states. In 1993, a larger number of Central and Eastern European countries participated for the first time, after nine countries had been admitted to the Council of Europe. In 2024, CENL is a network of 46 national libraries in 45 European countries.

Since its inception in 1987, CENL has held 36 annual meetings, with the 2024 meeting returning to Warsaw for the second time since 1997. A total of 27 countries have hosted an annual meeting, with ten countries hosting two meetings each.

CENL has been led by directors from five countries. Kenneth R. Cooper, Chief Executive of the British Library, led CENL during its formative years from 1987 to 1990. Klaus-Dieter Lehmann of Die Deutsche Bibliothek chaired from 1991 to 1997. Wim van Drimmelen, Director General of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (National Library of the

²³ <https://home.unicode.org/about-unicode/>

Netherlands), took over in 1998. After a short term by Jean-Frédéric Jauslin of the Swiss National Library (2003-2004), Elisabeth Niggemann of the German National Library was Chair from 2005 to 2011. She was succeeded by Bruno Racine of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (2012-2015) and Roly Keating of the British Library (2016-2020). Since 2021, Frank Scholze, Director General of the German National Library, has chaired the CENL Executive Committee.

First Website and Public Relations

In the mid-1990s, the European National Libraries launched a pioneering project known as the Gateway to European National Libraries (GABRIEL), marking their first jointly financed service offered to the public. GABRIEL represented the initial collective internet presence of European National Libraries, involving 39 libraries from Council of Europe member states that participated in CENL and GABRIEL at the time. The primary goal was to enhance access to European National Libraries, aiming to avoid long loading times by designing simple yet attractive web pages. On October 1, 1996, the official information service of European National Libraries went live on the internet. The website featured links to member libraries' websites and prominently highlighted GABRIEL.

GABRIEL not only linked information sources about collections and services of National Libraries but also introduced the pilot version of the virtual exhibition "Treasures from Europe's National Libraries" in 1998. This virtual exhibition, showcasing around 100 treasures from 24 national libraries, was officially launched on the internet in February 1999. Even at that early stage, the ambition was to build a virtual European library and a European cultural network encompassing libraries, museums, and archives. GABRIEL can be seen as a precursor to Europeana, Europe's digital platform for cultural heritage.²⁴

Since 1989, developments in National Libraries were initially shared through brief annual reports and later summarized annually in the "LIBER quarterly" journal. Today, news and updates can be found on the CENL website under "News & Events"²⁵, as well as in a regularly published newsletter.

The themes discussed and worked on in groups and projects at annual meetings today were set during the first East-West conference and have evolved with technological advancements and changes in library organization²⁶. These include harmonization and innovation of national library policies, adoption of new information technologies,

²⁴ Europas digitales Kulturerbe entdecken | Europeana <<https://www.europeana.eu/de>>

²⁵ <https://www.cenl.org/news-events/>

²⁶ <https://www.cenl.org/about-cenl/>

standardization of data structures and communication interfaces in a European network, and preservation of important collections across Europe.

Moreover, the European National Libraries have evolved alongside societal changes, with sustainability emerging as a significant focus. This was the overarching theme of the 2023 Annual General Meeting held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, with a publication featuring various contributions just released²⁷. The issue of legal deposit, particularly concerning electronic publications, continues to be a focal point and will be the theme of this year's annual meeting at the National Library of Poland in Warsaw.

Renate Gömpel²⁸

²⁷ All Roads lead to Rome, or: National libraries on their ways to sustainability (2024). – <[urn:nbn:de:101-2023092125](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:101-2023092125)>

²⁸ Renate Gömpel is currently Director of the Department of Use and Preservation and has worked at the German National Library since 1982. As Personal Assistant to the Director General Klaus-Dieter Lehmann, she was responsible for the CENL Secretariat during his term of office. In the early years of CENL from 1988 onwards, Klaus-Dieter Lehmann was supported by Ute Schwens, today the Permanent Representative of the Director General at the Frankfurt am Main site.