

**18 / Twin Research**

Psychology: How do people develop?

**40 / Risk of Power Outage**

The critical infrastructure is vulnerable

**52 / YUFE in Development**

The new alliance sharpens its contours



## CORAL REEFS IN CRISIS

Globally only 30 percent remain  
in a good condition

The **Research Centre for East European Studies (FSO)** at the University of Bremen is indexing archive material on the politically persecuted in the Soviet Union. The aim is to preserve an alternative memory of human rights abuse in the time following Stalin. In today's Russia, this coming to terms with the past is exposed to increasing political pressure. The sources include personal papers from former dissidents and also archive records from the Bukowsky Foundation. The foundation's director, Robert van Voren, regularly smuggled information on soviet political prisoners into the West in the 1980s.



Robert van Voren's most important companion in the fight for human rights: his address book. Under the book, there are developed photographs of a private letter from acquainted dissidents that he smuggled through the Iron Curtain.

Photo: Matej Meza



# “In Today’s Russia, Remembrance of Dissidents Is in Danger”

**Project secures sources of the politically persecuted in the Soviet Union**

By Sarah Batelka

● “I was extremely scared. I had no idea what was waiting for me behind the Iron Curtain and I saw KGB agents everywhere.” That is how the human rights activist Robert van Voren describes his arrival in Soviet Leningrad in 1980. At the age of 20 years, the Dutch history student flew to the Soviet Union for the first time disguised as a tourist. “I was a courier. My job was to take aid packages to the Soviet Union and return with information.” Russian dissidents and their families were to be helped in this way: whether they were in a prison camp, in exile, or in freedom. Since the 1960s, couriers like van Voren had been travelling to the Soviet Union several times a year, for example to Moscow, Kiev, and Leningrad. They were essential for the connection between the dissident movements and their Western supporters.

Van Voren took varying aid supplies with him on the outbound flight: thermal underwear, warm clothes, medi-

cation, vitamin tablets, and stock cubes in order to improve the nutrition of the people in the prison camps. In the winter months, van Voren always wore a new coat on his arrival, which he then passed on. “In the winter of 1984, the Nobel Peace Prize winner Andrei Sakharov wore my coat,” reports van Voren, “I was very proud of that.”

### Smuggled Goods: Information

When he returned to the Netherlands, he brought information with him: It was about the oppression, arrests, and convictions of the dissidents. He also smuggled self-published literature, so-called samizdat, which did not conform to the system, through the Iron Curtain. The distribution of dissenting opinions and uncensored literature without an official printing authorization was considered anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda and was punishable by imprisonment, exile, or deportation.



↑ The project team:  
Maria Klassen, Dr. Tatiana  
Dvinyatina, Alesia Kananchuk,  
Dr. Manuela Putz  
(from left to right)  
Photo: Matej Meza

*“In Bremen, we want to preserve an alternative remembrance of the former prison locations and their inmates.”*

*Project manager Dr. Manuela Putz*

“I learnt several of the texts by heart and I photographed others with slide film,” explains van Voren. In contrast to color or black-and-white film, slide film could not be developed and viewed quickly enough at the airport prior to departure. As a means of additional safety, he rerolled the films and placed them back in their packaging. “I regularly left the Soviet Union with ten to twelve ‘unused’ slide films. When they carried out a strip search, the films were in my travel bag on a table and passed through the checks unnoticed.” He developed the films when he was back in the Netherlands, printed the slides with the information and distributed it all over Europe using his address list.

Sources such as those that Robert van Voren smuggled into the West in the 1980s are part of an archive-indexing project that the Research Centre for East European Studies (FSO) at the University of Bremen has

been carrying out since 2019. The project will be supported by a grant from the Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship (Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung der SED Diktatur). The aim of the project is to make the materials on the politically persecuted and soviet prison company in the FSO archive accessible as quickly as possible and to prepare it for research. “In Bremen, we want to preserve an alternative remembrance of the former prison locations and their inmates,” explains Dr. Manuela Putz, project manager and scientific supervisor.

### **Russian Remembrance Culture Today**

In today’s Russia, the remembrance of dissidents is in danger of gradually becoming forgotten or even being expediently defamed. Independent archives, such as those of the human rights organization Memorial, were denounced as “foreign

agents”. State-supported transfer is also not available for the research sector. “Many files from this period are not open to the public. Above all, the KGB archive is closed. It is becoming ever more difficult to investigate political repressions in the post-Stalin era,” says Manuela Putz. “Our project is trying to save and preserve these sources.”

From 1972 until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the majority of the regime critics and dissidents were incarcerated in three prison camps near to the village of Kuchino in the Perm region, which is around 1,150 kilometers north-east of Moscow. As “especially dangerous political offenders”, the majority were convicted of “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda” and received lengthy prison sentences. The prison camps were already known in the circles of Soviet dissidents, national opposition members from the Baltic region and the Ukraine, and human rights activists in the West under the name Perm political prison camps. “Since then, they have been considered synonymous with illegal, political persecution in the Soviet Union,” explains the project manager.

She investigated prisons in her dissertation. “In contrast to the Gulag system and the mass repressions under the dictator Josef Stalin, society has not sufficiently come to terms with the prison camps and the repression of dissidents and regime critics after 1953,” according to Dr. Putz. The archive-indexing project is intended to create the necessary foundations for further scientific research but also lay a scientifically founded basis for historical-political educational work.

### **Around 107 Boxes of Archive Material**

The lifetime and posthumous bequests of former political prisoners from the Perm political prison camps as well as information materials and correspondence from their supporters in the West at the time are held in around 107 archive boxes. There are an additional 1,400 digital files on the Museum Perm-36 memorial, such as the index cards of former prisoners. They were brought to safety in Bremen when the museum, which was founded from a civil society initiative in the 1990s, was placed under state control in 2014. Since then, the museum no longer commemorates the victims but rather praises the “achievements of the penal system staff.” The material is being viewed, ordered, and entered into a database with keywords by FSO archivists. “The entries are in the original Russian language and in German, so that students and pupils can work with them,” explains the scientific supervisor.

*“The life and thoughts of inmates can be reconstructed using the sources.”*

*Professor Susanne Schattenberg,  
FSO director*

It is an extremely important project for the research center, according to the FSO director, Professor Susanne Schattenberg: “It shapes collections from significant dissidents, such as Vladimir Bukowsky or Semyon Gluzman, in such a manner that scientists can use them well.” For the research of repression in the post-Stalin period, biographical sources are of particular significance for several reasons. “Using sources, the life and thoughts of former inmates can be reconstructed. Sources such as the letters from the camps tell the story of political persecution in another manner. They provide information on mental wellbeing and on what incarceration does to people.”

Moreover, the material also sheds light on the diverse effects of repression and imprisonment on the day-to-day lives of the wives, who were usually also dissidents but were arrested more infrequently. They were then responsible for material provision and organizing the criminal defense for their husbands. “In some cases, the women were let go by their employer, were isolated within society, and developed protest activities themselves.” Letters of complaint and petitions make it clear how precarious their

Since its establishment in 1982, the **FSO’s independent archive** has had the goal of collecting and researching testimonies of critical thinking in Eastern Europe. Today, the archive holds a worldwide unique collection of more than 600 lifetime and posthumous bequests from former regime

critics, human rights activists, authors, and artists from the former Soviet Union. Unique compilations of samizdat literature, flyers, and underground stamps from Poland and former Czechoslovakia have been comprised. Smaller collections also originate from the GDR and Hungary.



← Pink reply cards from the archive collection of the Amnesty International activist Christa Bremer. Using these postcards, the Deutsche Post confirmed the successful delivery of her letters to regime critics and former political prisoners in the Soviet Union.  
Photo: Matej Meza

situation was and that the stigma of political persecution did not leave them after their imprisonment. “By means of these personal archives, entirely different approaches are possible in comparison to before,” summarizes Manuela Putz.

### Sources from a Bremen Activist

Furthermore, dissidence and political imprisonment in post-Stalin times cannot be understood when isolated but only in interrelation with Western parties. “The fight for freedom and human rights was a global phenomenon.” The material also includes the bequest of the Bremen Amnesty International activist Christa Bremer. She corresponded via letters with a long list of former political prisoners in the Perm political prison camps for many years. “The collections are closely intertwined with each other and only when they are combined do they offer an overview of the dynamics of the Cold War, the politically motivated prosecutions in the Soviet Union, and its effects that reach to the present,” explains the project manager.

The courier Robert van Voren was rid of his fear in 1983 when he was arrested by the KGB. “I had a meeting with the Independent Peace Movement in Moscow. As the flat was tapped, we went to a park. There were a surprising

number of people stood next to the trees relieving themselves. We were surrounded before I was able to realize what was happening.” The group was taken to the police station in two police cars and was questioned. “It was there that I realized that the agents were normal people just doing their job. I saw their faces. The KGB lost its mystique for me and my fear disappeared.” They finally let van Voren go after hours of questioning. He booked his next trip to the Soviet Union as soon as he was back in the Netherlands. ●

Further Information:

The human rights activist Robert van Voren told our **up2date**. online magazine of what he experienced as a courier. You can read the full interview here:

▶ <https://up2date.uni-bremen.de/en/university-society/the-courier-of-the-politically-persecuted>

**Up2date**. also spoke to the director of the Perm branch of the international human rights organization Memorial, Robert Latypov, about dissidents in Russia's culture of remembrance:

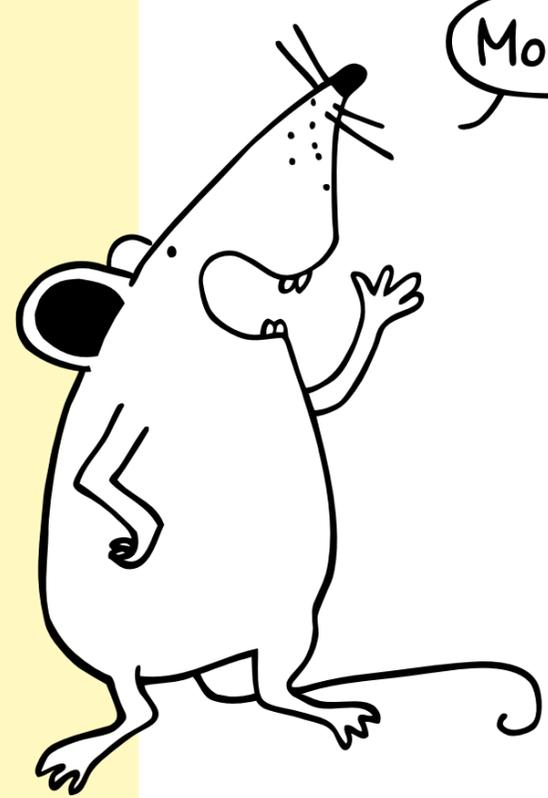
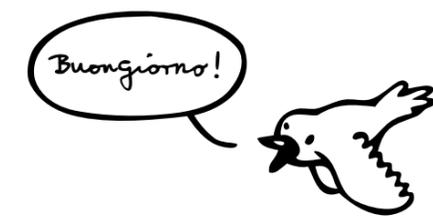
▶ <https://up2date.uni-bremen.de/en/university-society/dissidents-in-the-russian-remembrance-culture>

## teaching & studies

Learning languages: Arduous and difficult or interesting and easy? Rather alone, in a course, with a tandem partner, or in a relaxed group? With a book or with a computer? Regardless of how you do it – learning a language is one of life's big challenges. Especially in the academic sector. Nowadays, you can hardly be successful in your studies or scientific career without knowledge of an additional language. The **Foreign Languages Centre** for the Universities in the Land of Bremen – or FZHB – has been helping for 25 years. In May 2020, the centre will be celebrating its birthday.



# Italian for Opera Singers, Georgian for Economists



**Nothing is impossible: The Foreign Languages Centre has been helping people at the universities in the state of Bremen to learn languages for the last 25 years**

By Kai Uwe Bohn

● A quarter of a century of successful work. Thousands of students, scientists, and staff members have been taught new languages or have deepened their available knowledge. That is something to be proud of. The question of whether the future of the language centre does, in fact, not look so rosy seems to be strange. However, the question is valid when taking into consideration how Google Translator and the DeepL program are continually becoming better in translating languages and how computer technologies and artificial intelligence are enabling greater advancements. The head of the Foreign Languages Centre in Bremen, Professor