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TITLE: GDR Oral History Project

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**THE NATIONAL COUNCIL
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RESEARCH**

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PROJECT INFORMATION:

CONTRACTOR: Kellogg Institute, University of Notre Dame
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: A. James McAdams
COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 806-06b
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SUMMARY

GDR ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

A. JAMES MCADAMS
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In 1994, the Hoover Institution for War, Revolution, and Peace at Stanford University will open a major new archive, a collection of over 80 oral histories of leading politicians and policymakers from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). The GDR Oral History Project was initiated in 1990 by Professor A. James McAdams of the Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame. The project was made possible largely through the financial assistance of the National Council for Soviet and East European Research. The Hoover Institution is currently supporting the transcription of all of the interviews in the collection. When the collection is completed, it will be possible for scholars from around the world to listen to the personal recollections and reflections of many of the individuals who ruled communist East Germany since the country's founding in 1949, as well as of those individuals who initiated the East German revolution in 1989 and helped facilitate the reunification of Germany one year later.

GDR ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

A. JAMES MCADAMS

INTRODUCTION

In 1994, the Hoover Institution for War, Revolution, and Peace at Stanford University will open a major new archive, a collection of over 80 oral histories of leading politicians and policymakers from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). The GDR Oral History Project was initiated in 1990 by Professor A. James McAdams of the Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame. It was made possible largely through the financial assistance of the National Council for Soviet and East European Research. Other supporters included the Center for German Studies at the University of California, Berkeley and the John Foster Dulles Program in Leadership Studies at Princeton University. The Hoover Institution is currently supporting the transcription of all of the interviews in the collection.

The aim of the GDR Oral History Project was to record on tape some of the still vivid memories of the former leaders of East Germany, so that in 50 or 100 years (the amount of time Socialist Unity Party [SED] general secretary, Erich Honecker, predicted the Berlin Wall would last) future students of German history would have a unique source for assessing the driving motivations of the individuals who once made up the country's dominant political culture. Of course, no series of interviews alone can realistically relate the entire history of a state. Nevertheless, the researchers felt they could preserve for posterity a segment of that experience by interviewing a select group of individuals who could reasonably be characterized as the East German political elite.

In particular, the Oral History Project chose to interview four types of politically significant individuals. In the first group, we emphasized well-known representatives of the SED, such as former members of the ruling politburo and central committee, like Kurt Hager, Karl Schirdewan, Günther Kleiber, Herbert

Häber, Werner Eberlein, Egon Krenz, and Gerhard Schürer. The second group was broader, comprised largely of members of the party and state apparatus. In this case, our goal was to identify a sample of policy implementors, from diplomats to department heads. Thus, we focused on key departments of the SED central committee, such as Agitation and Propaganda and International Affairs, and sections of state ministries, such as the foreign ministry department charged with East German-Soviet relations. Our third group of interviewees was comprised of so-called policymaking intellectuals. This disparate group, with representatives ranging from economist Jürgen Kuczynski to socialist theoretician Otto Reinhold, primarily included individuals who had some tangential relationship to policymaking; we particularly emphasized former members of SED policy institutes, such as the Academy of Social Sciences and the Institute of Politics and Economics. Finally, as the Oral History Project grew, we decided to develop a fourth group of interviewees in order to cast light upon the transition from the GDR to unified Germany. This category was drawn from former dissidents who became politicians, including such wide-ranging personalities as Markus Meckel, Lothar de Maiziere, Jens Reich, and Wolfgang Ullmann.¹

From the beginning of the project, the organizers were confronted with a question that all oral historians face: how to find an appropriate balance between the competing norms of "richness" and "rigor." Rigor involves the kind of rigidly-structured interviews that will lend themselves to social scientific generalization and even quantification; richness, in contrast, favors the unique political and personal story of each individual to be interviewed. On the side of rigor, we provided all of our interviewees with a concrete set of core questions to guarantee that the interviews would not be entirely random. Nearly everyone interviewed was asked previously formulated questions about their family background and social class, their particular

¹ Since the opportunity arose to conduct interviews with individuals in the former Soviet party apparatus who had dealings with the GDR, we also conducted several interviews in Moscow. However, the Soviet-East German relationship never evolved into a formal interview category.

path to political engagement, their views on the German national question, their perceptions of the outside world, and their personal experience with policymaking in the GDR.

Yet, if we leaned in any particular direction in developing the project, it was in favor of richness. Clearly, we did not have the resources to interview the number of representatives of the GDR elite that would have been required for quantitative social-science analysis. We also found that it was best to tailor many of our questions to the individuals' own experiences, since we were dealing with very different sorts of people, with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Some, for example, had worked closely with major figures like Walter Ulbricht; others had been uniquely positioned to understand major events, such as the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. We did not want any of these memories, however idiosyncratic, to be lost to future historians. Finally, we believed that after the formal questions were posed, it was crucial to let our discussion partners speak for themselves about what mattered most in their lives. Sometimes they took the interview in directions that we could not have anticipated.

Not surprisingly, we initially approached our interviews with certain guiding preconceptions about how our discussions might progress and what we might discover. As the Oral History Project developed, some of these assumptions were borne out; but provocatively, others were not. In every case, however, our successes and failures turned out to be enormously revealing about the nature of the project itself and about East German history.

Our first preconception was that we might have a hard time getting some of the most senior SED officials to talk openly about their past. This concern turned out not to be serious; in the majority of cases, they seemed to speak freely about their experiences, particularly when we assured them that we were not interested in "sensationalist journalism." With only a few exceptions--primarily, those facing criminal prosecution--it was quite easy to gain access to these former leaders, even to individuals who had granted no other interviews to westerners. We had an unexpected advantage: for the most part, we were Americans, indeed Americans

from the well-known Hoover Institution. In the perception of many of our interviewees, we were worthy victors. Many were actually thrilled to welcome representatives of the "class enemy" into their living rooms, provided that we would not turn over their interviews to one of the "boulevard newspapers," like the Bildzeitung. Three eastern German social scientists also conducted interviews for us. They had the advantage of knowing how to speak the "language" of their former leaders. On balance, our main advantage seemed to be that no members of the Oral History Project came from former West Germany, which was still regarded by our interviewees with suspicion.

In retrospect, the readiness of these individuals to speak with us should probably not have been so surprising. After all, by depositing their thoughts in a major archive, we were assuring them that we were taking their experiences seriously and perhaps even guaranteeing that their lives had not been lived in vain. This is no mean consideration in view of what happened to the GDR. Naturally, future scholars will have to come to their own conclusions about the honesty and sincerity of each interview. Occasionally, we detected moments of outright dishonesty. Sometimes our interviewees simply refused to talk about embarrassing moments in their lives (e.g., association with the Stasi). There was also a recurring tendency for younger individuals, or those lowest on the old hierarchy, to portray themselves as something they were not before 1989--such as, closet reformists or enthusiastic supporters of Mikhail Gorbachev. There were also frequent problems with memory; some older interviewees could remember the "anti-fascist struggles" of the late 1920s with absolute clarity, but could not recall the 1950s at all.

These sorts of problems afflict all oral histories. Yet, there were many moments when we could not help but be struck by the candor of our interviewees. Many showed a surprising readiness to talk about issues that we expected to be embarrassing to them. The best example of this was the Berlin Wall, which they nearly always defended in animated terms. From the first days of the interview project, there was also a telling recognition among the leading representatives of the SED elite that they had lost the battle with the West and that they were beginning to

accept this reality. Thus, there was none of the crazed rambling and denial that one found in previously published interviews with Erich Honecker. Among several interviewees, there was even a notable respect for their former opponents, such as East German dissident, Bärbel Bohley, and the late West German Green, Petra Kelly. Undoubtedly, there were many points where one wanted more self-criticism from our discussion partners. Yet, some of our interviewers wondered whether this same quality would have been available from comparable politicians in the West. As one eastern German interviewer reflected: "Any political elite has to confront issues involving moral integrity in the daily course of its activities, and each individual must make his peace with truth as he can."

Our second preconception was that we could use such interviews to uncover new facts about the GDR. No doubt, anyone listening to the hundreds of hours of tapes in this collection will encounter a number of interesting facts about distinct events in the East German past (for example, about the mysterious death of planning minister Erich Apel in 1965, about the lack of East German involvement in the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and about the banning of the Soviet publication, Sputnik, in 1988). Moreover, the interviews also serve to undermine many of the stereotypes that scholars have cultivated about some of East Germany's best-known politicians; sometimes the "good guys" turn out to be not so good in the recollections of their former associates, and the "bad guys" not nearly so bad.

Yet, one of our most interesting findings is how little most policymakers, including many members of the SED's highest circles, actually knew about some of the most important events and controversies of the East German past. We feel that this says a lot about the nature of politics in the GDR. This really was a system which kept all politically significant facts restricted to very few people. We discovered that even at politburo meetings, leaders discussed very little of substance. The most important decisions were frequently made by two or three individuals walking in the woods on a weekend. In these instances, expertise rarely played a major role.

Even if we did not acquire the full stories about some of the events in the East

German past that interested us most, the opportunity to discuss such issues as the construction of the Berlin Wall or the SED's opposition to Gorbachev was unique. Indeed, future scholars may find that these interviews provide a natural complement to the mountains of written documents that have recently become available to us in such collections as the Central Party Archives in Berlin. For in the latter case, we have huge new reservoirs of historical facts, but we frequently lack the personal perspectives necessary to interpret them.

A third preconception was that we would learn much more about policymaking processes in the GDR. This turned out to be true, although not for the reasons we envisioned. Initially, we thought that by interviewing individuals at different levels of the decision-making apparatus of the SED, we would be able to construct a rough flow chart of authority, showing how decisions moved upward, downward, or outward in a complex hierarchy. Not only did we never encounter such structures, but we received constant affirmation that, by the 1980s, no well-established hierarchies existed at all. As we have already suggested, absolute power was concentrated in very few hands, and all other expressions of political activity took place on a highly informal and personalistic basis. Even the SED politburo had the character of a rubber stamp; to the extent that there were differences among its members--and these did exist on some questions--they were only expressed on a private basis over the lunch table at the ruling body's Tuesday meetings. It is striking that even those who might have been considered personal cronies of SED General Secretary Erich Honecker did not feel that they controlled very much. They, too, felt like cogs in the socialist wheel.

In contrast to this image of a faceless, even amorphous policymaking culture, there was also provocative agreement in many of the interviews that politics in the GDR had not always been so uniform and that it had changed particularly since the 1950s. Those individuals who were politically active in East Germany's first decade were practically unanimous in conveying an image of policymaking during that period that is conspicuously more collegial than anything later experienced in the GDR. Among them, there was a consensus that East Germany's first leader, Walter

Ulbricht, was only a primus inter pares in the early 1950s, and that those around him could and did oppose his views on a regular basis. These findings seem to concur with the written records of the Central Party Archives.

Finally, we came closest to meeting our fourth preconception: that we could record our interviewees' views on the great issues and great debates of the GDR past. In this case, we were listening to people's perceptions that they could remember, regardless of how well they knew the details of an issue. They could say what was important to them, and what was not. Many spoke passionately about matters that had once been life or death questions for their country. This was, above all, true of the long-disputed German national question. In contrast to some Western scholarship which has held the GDR's national policy to be little more than a tactical diversion, all of the interviews conveyed a strong sense that, at least until the early 1960s, if not later, the SED leadership really did believe that it was offering a valid German path to socialism. Walter Ulbricht emerges as practically obsessed with the issue, and much of his downfall in 1970-1971 can be explained in terms of this obsession.

Similarly, the Oral History Project offers a very nuanced perspective of the complex relations that existed between the GDR and its superpower ally, the Soviet Union. It will not surprise anyone to hear that some differences existed between East Berlin and Moscow. But future scholars may be impressed by the extent of these differences, as recorded in the interviews, and by how far back they reach in East German history (e.g., in Ulbricht's efforts to push through the economic reforms of the New Economic System in the 1960s, despite manifest Soviet opposition). Additionally, the Oral History Project affords a unique perspective on the East German-Soviet conflict that emerged in the 1980s with the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev's reformist leadership. Standard Kremlinological approaches to the study of communist leadership might lead one to expect the East German politburo to have been divided into factions of "Gorbachev opponents" and "Gorbachev supporters," with comparable divisions existing within the Soviet leadership over policy to the GDR. But aside from a few slight exceptions, we were surprised to find almost no evidence of factional divisions over the GDR's relationship with Moscow.

Of all of the great issues of the East German past, the interviews offer a very clear picture of the evolution of East Berlin's relations with the Federal Republic of Germany. They depict an exceptionally close relationship between the two German states, in fact, one which defies all assertions that the essence of West German policy was to hold the German question open for some future resolution. With German reunification now an accepted fact, future scholars may be intrigued to hear, from the eastern German perspective, how seriously Bonn took the leaders of the GDR and how much of West German policy was based upon the assumption that the Berlin Wall would remain in place for "50 or even 100 years."

In sum, while the GDR Oral History Project does not presume to offer a complete or unbiased perspective on East Germany's history, we believe it is a valuable source of information and interpretations for future scholars to use as they seek to make sense of the GDR's past. We are not aware of any comparable, publicly accessible projects on the GDR's history, particularly in Germany itself, although much smaller interview collections on the history of inter-German relations in the 1960s and the roots of the East German revolution of 1989 are being assembled. Nor do we know of any similar efforts to capture the memories of comparable political elites in other East European states, although the Hoover Institution is now beginning a similar interview project on the old Soviet elite. Therefore, we hope that the Oral History Project will serve as an inspiration to researchers seeking to lay the foundations for future scholarship on countries as diverse as Poland, Romania, Hungary, and the former Czechoslovakia.

The GDR Oral History Project would not have been possible without the generous assistance of a number of experts on the history of the GDR. Aside from A. James McAdams, interviewers for the project included Thomas Banchoff, Heinrich Bortfeldt, Catherine Epstein, Dan Hamilton, Gerd Kaiser, Jeffrey Kopstein, Olga Sandler, Matthew Siena, John Torpey, and Klaus Zechmeister. Elena Danielson of the Hoover Archives played a central role in the project, cataloguing all of the interviews and arranging for their transcription. (see preliminary list of tapes on pages 10-14)

Once the GDR Oral History Project is formally opened in late 1994, all of the interviews in the collection will be equally accessible to any interested scholars, provided that interviewees have not previously requested copyright restrictions on the use of the material. For further information on the collection, one may contact the Hoover Archives:

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Hoover Institution for War, Revolution, and Peace
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-6010

For background information, one may contact:

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Preliminary Listing of East German Oral History Tapes
July 21, 1993

PROF. A. JAMES McADAMS

This collection will be open for research in 1994.

NARRATOR	INTERVIEWER	DATE
Bezymenskii, Lev 1 cassette Sandler intends to make the transcript, in Russia Re Soviet-German relations	Sandler, Olga contract signed retains copyright	June 25, 1992 photo
Bisky, Lothar, Prof. 1 cassette * transcript by Bortfeldt	Bortfeldt, Heinrich signed contract	April 6, 1993
Bock, Siegfried 2 cassettes * transcript by Renee Schell	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	May 18, 1992 photo
Bohley, Bärbel 2 cassettes (audio quality poor)	Torpey signed contract	April 2, 1993
Böhm, Joachim 2 cassettes Deputy Director, ZK Dept. Re relations with socialist countries Berg-Lunk working on transcript	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	December 5, 1990 photo
Brie, Michael 1 cassette * transcript by C. Blume	Siena, Matt signed contract	December 23, 1991 photo
Buhr, Manfred 2 cassettes Zechmeister working on transcript	Zechmeister signed contract	December 23, 1992
Diestei, Peter-Michael 1 cassette * transcript by Bortfeldt	Bortfeldt, Heinrich signed contract	December 15, 1992
Doernberg, Stefan 2 cassettes * transcript by Bortfeldt	Bortfeldt, Heinrich signed contract	November 10, 1992
1 cassette	Kaiser, Gerd signed contract	January 15 & July 27, 1993

Ebeling, Dr. Fred 3 cassettes (minis) Member, Demokratischer Aufbruch copied onto 4 reg cassettes	Torpey, John signed contracts	January 28, 1992 (3) August 23, 1991 (1) photo
Eberlein, Werner 3 cassettes (minis) copied onto 2 reg. cassettes Member DDR Politbüro 1983-89 Son of KPD co-founder Hugo Eberlein Russian interpreter for Ulbricht & Honecker * transcript by Berg-Lunk	Torpey, John signed contract	February 2, 1992 photo
Elmer, Konrad 1 cassette SPD member, Bundestag	Banchoff, Thomas signed contract	December 5, 1991 photo, cv
Eppelmann, Rainer 1 cassette * transcript by T.Banchoff	Banchoff, Thomas signed contract	December 5/12, 1991 photo, cv
2 cassettes * transcript by Berg-Lunk	Hamilton, Dan. signed contract	Nov. 9, 1991
Fischer, Oskar 2 cassettes	McAdams signed contract	March 9, 1993 photo
Fischer, Peter 2 cassettes	Siena, Matthew signed contract	December 23, 1991 photo
Fritschler, Hans-Dieter with Scherzer, Landolf cassettes in mail	Kaiser, Gerd *contract pending	September 7, 1992
Gauck, Joachim 2 cassettes * transcript by Berg-Lunk	Torpey signed contract retains copyright	April 23, 1993
Grosse, Lea 1 cassette * transcript by C. Blume	Kaiser, Dr. G. signed contract	February 13, 1992
Gysi, Klaus 3 cassettes Transcript pending (Siena)	Siena, Matthew signed contract	December 28, 1991 (2) January 3, 1990 (1) 2 photos
Häber, Herbert, Prof. 2 cassettes former member, DDR Politbüro 2 cassettes Transcript by Schell	McAdams, A. J. signed contract signed contract	March 19, 1990 photo March 8, 1993 photo

Hager, Kurt, Prof. 4 cassettes * transcript by Ursula Berg-Lunk. January 1993	McAdams, A. J. signed contract retains copyright	July 11, 1991 (2) December 3, 1990 (2) photo. cv
Hahn, Erich, Prof. Dr. 1 cassette * transcript by Heinrich Bortfeldt, August 18, 1992	Bortfeldt, Heinrich signed contract	February 28, 1991 photo
Hanke, Brunhilde and Helmut	Plagemann, K.H.	July 22, 1991
Harich, Wolfgang 2 cassettes	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	December 1, 1990 photo
Herger, Wolfgang 4 cassettes (minis) Member DDR Politbüro copied onto 3 reg. cassettes	Torpey, John signed contracts	January 30, 1992 (3) September 16, 1991(1) photo, cv
Heuer, Uwe-Jens 1 cassette	Banchoff, Thomas signed contract	November 14, 1991 election brochure
Hilsberg, Stephan 1 cassette	Banchoff, Thomas signed contract	June 14, 1991 photo, cv
Just, Gustav 3 cassettes (minis) Member of Gruppe Harich, SPD member Brandenburger Landtag * transcript by John Torpey, May 22, 1992	Torpey, John signed contract	February 1, 1992(2) July 14, 1991 (1)
Keller, Dietmar 1 cassette	Banchoff, Thomas signed contract	November 25, 1991 photo. cv
Kern, Karl-Heinz 2 cassettes	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	May 22, 1992 photo
Kleiber, Günther 2 cassettes	Zechmeister signed contract	Nov. 26, 1992
König, Gerd	McAdams, A.J.	March 9, 1993
Krabatsch, Ernst 1 cassette * transcript by T. Banchoff	Banchoff, Thomas signed contract	March 25, 1992
Krenz, Egon 2 cassettes * transcript by Heinrich Bortfeldt. 1992	Bortfeldt, Heinrich signed contract	May 31, 1990
Kuczynski, Jürgen 1 cassette * transcript by Heinrich Bortfeldt. 1992	Bortfeldt, Heinrich signed contract	October 1, 1991

Lötsch, Manfred 3 cassettes (minis) copied onto 3 reg cassettes	Torpey, John signed contracts	January 28, 1992(2) February 27, 1991(1) photo
Maiziere, Lothar de 3 cassettes 1 cassette * transcript by Heinrich Bortfeldt Jan. 1993	Hamilton, Dan. signed contract Bortfeldt, Heinrich signed contract	November 12, 1991 November 4, 1992
Mebel, Moritz 2 cassettes * transcript by Heinrich Bortfeldt, 1992	Bortfeldt, Heinrich signed contract	February 27, 1991 photo
Meckel, Markus 1 cassette * transcript by Thomas Banchoff, 1992	Banchoff, Thomas signed contract	June 10, 1991 photo, cv
Melamid, Daniel 1 cassette	Sandler, Olga signed contract	July 1, 1992 photo
Misselwitz, Hans	Bortfeldt	
Modrow, Hans 1 cassette * transcript by HB	Bortfeldt signed contract	March 17, 1993
Montag, Claus, Prof. Dr. 1 cassette	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	July 9, 1991
Müller, Erwin 2 cassettes	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	May 21, 1992 photo
Neubert, Harald 1 cassette	McAdams, A. J. signed contract no commercial use without permission	December 4, 1990 photos. cv
Orlov, Boris 1 cassette	Sandler, Olga signed contract	June 23, 1992 photo
Ortleb, Rainer 1 cassette * transcript by T. Banchoff	Banchoff, Thomas signed contract	December 19, 1991 photo, cv
Plagemann, Karl-Ernst 1 cassette * transcript by Berg-Lunk	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	November 17, 1990
Reich, Jens 2 cassettes * transcript by Siena for 91 interview	Siena, Matthew signed contract	December 23 1991 (1) December 28, 1989 (1) ('92) photos

Reichenbach, Klaus 1 cassette * transcript by T. Banchoff	Banchoff, Thomas signed contract	May 6, 1992
Reinhold, Otto 4 cassettes * transcript by Bortfeldt for 91 interview * transcript by Bortfeldt for 90 interview	Bortfeldt, Heinrich McAdams, A. J. signed contract	January 29, 1991 (2) March 23, 1990 (2) ('92) photo
Reißig, Rolf, Prof. 2 cassettes	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	May 19, 1992 photo
Runge, Irene 2 cassettes * transcript by Siena	Siena, Matthew signed contract	December 19, 1991 photos
Schindler, Hans 2 cassettes	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	October 3, 1991 photo
Schirdewan, Karl 3 cassettes * transcript by Blume and Berg-Lunk	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	July 9, 1991
Schirmer, Gregor	McAdams, A.J.	March 7, 1993
Schürer, Gerhard 1 cassette * transcript by Berg-Lunk	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	July 10, 1991
Seidel, Karl 1 cassette	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	July 8, 1991
Templin, Wolfgang 4 cassettes (minis) copied onto 4 reg.	Torpey, John signed contracts also Regina Templin	February 3, 1992 (3) August 29, 1991 (1) photo
Thun, Ferdinand	McAdams, A.J.	March 10, 1993
Ullmann, Wolfgang 1 cassette	Banchoff, Thomas signed contract	November 12, 1991 photo, cv
Uschner, Manfred 2 cassettes 2 cassettes	McAdams, A. J. signed contract Zechmeister signed contract	October 4, 1991 photo March 10, 1993
Voß, Hans, Dr. 2 cassettes	McAdams, A. J. signed contract	May 22, 1992 photo
Wirth, Günter 3 cassettes	Zechmeister signed contract	December 2, 1992
Wroblewski, Vincent von 1 cassette	Siena, Matthew signed contract	December 12, 1991 photo