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Internal Assessments for the publishing house *Aufbau* in the German Democratic Republic

A Glimpse into Elga Abramowitz's *Vorlass*

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Abstract

Elga Abramowitz, editor and translator, worked mainly for the Aufbau publishing house in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1952 to 1990. During her time there, she was responsible for a variety of tasks within the publishing house. Through the preservation of her Vorlass, we have the opportunity to explore her varied work. In particular, this article focuses on the assessments she wrote for Aufbau-Verlag – not the much-discussed assessments for the print permit process, but assessments written to determine the suitability of works for publication in Aufbau-Verlag. These documents were intended for internal use within the publishing house and can offer some insight into assessment and publishing processes in the German Democratic Republic's publishing houses, particularly the Aufbau-Verlag. One of the most interesting finds is that often, the quality rather than the ideological content of the texts seemed to be a determining factor regarding which books were recommended for publication.

Keywords: GDR; Aufbau-Verlag; Translator; Editor; Assessments

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Abstract:

Elga Abramowitz, editor and translator, worked mainly for the Aufbau publishing house in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1952 to 1990. During her time there, she was responsible for a variety of tasks within the publishing house. Through the preservation of her Vorlass, we have the opportunity to explore her varied work. In particular, this article focuses on the assessments she wrote for Aufbau-Verlag – not the much-discussed assessments for the print permit process, but assessments written to determine the suitability of works for publication in Aufbau-Verlag. These documents were intended for internal use within the publishing house and can offer some insight into assessment and publishing processes in the German Democratic Republic's publishing houses, particularly the Aufbau-Verlag. One of the most interesting finds is that often, the quality rather than the ideological content of the texts seemed to be a determining factor regarding which books were recommended for publication.

Introduction

Elga Abramowitz considers herself entirely unexceptional. And to some extent, she is right – she is one of many in a number of aspects. There were many others who translated from English into German in the German Democratic Republic, and more who were editors at publishing houses in the GDR. Others were equally active as both editors and translators, though few were in the field as long as Abramowitz was, whose tenure spanned nearly the entire life span of the GDR. In the particular case of Elga Abramowitz, we have the material to study what she did and why she may have done it, allowing for a microstudy of a translator and editor active mainly during the GDR and for one specific publishing house in particular.

I first came into contact with Elga Abramowitz in the summer of 2018 when we were assigned 'unknown' translators to research for a class. She granted me a telephone interview; a year later I visited her in Berlin and secured her *Vorlass* by digitizing it, resulting in over 1 000 images of documents related to her professional life.¹ In the years since digitizing

¹ This first interview was published in Tashinskiy, Boguna and Kelletat, *Übersetzer und Übersetzen in der DDR* (2020). While a *Nachlass* is a collection of documents left behind by someone after their death, usually including items such as letters, unpublished manuscripts, notes, and other materials related to

Abramowitz's *Vorlass*, I have spent no small amount of time indexing and organizing the material collected and have based my doctoral thesis on it. This article seeks to give a brief overview of Abramowitz's biography and how she came to be a translator and editor, followed by the presentation of a small part of the *Vorlass*. The information regarding Elga Abramowitz's biography is sourced mainly from interviews conducted with her and supplemented by material in the *Vorlass*.

Biographical Overview

Elga Abramowitz was born on October 24th, 1926. Her father, the merchant Ernst Abramowitz, originally hailed from Vienna but met and married her mother, Margarete Müller, in Berlin, where they subsequently settled. Abramowitz's adolescence coincided with the National Socialist Party's rise to power; her parents did the best they could to protect her from their worries regarding the family's connection to the Jewish faith, as Ernst Abramowitz's father was a Jew. For although the family's Austrian citizenship offered some protection until the country's annexation by Germany in 1938, as did Ernst's age – he was born in 1880 – one could never be certain.

In 1942, schools closed due to direct airstrikes on the city of Berlin. This meant a teenage Elga Abramowitz was unable to take the school leaving exams which would qualify her for entrance to university, which she greatly desired. Instead, she was required to provide auxiliary services in the Limpert publishing house until it was demolished in an airstrike on February 3rd, 1945. After the war, the Abramowitz family was still miraculously intact, in no small part thanks to Ernst Abramowitz: The Russian language skills he had learned during an extended internment in Siberia during World War I had granted him the ability to negotiate with the occupying forces to protect his family as well as his neighborhood. He also provided interpreting services for the Soviet Army on several occasions.

Once the war had ended, Abramowitz completed a training course at the Lette-Verein to be an interpreter for the English language in September of 1946, then worked as a *Schulhelferin* – a kind of emergency teacher, as denazification had led to an extreme shortage of teachers – for some time. She took her school leaving exams and enrolled in the *Universität zu Berlin* (later Humboldt University) as soon as she was permitted to do so. She began studying to be a German and English teacher for upper-level secondary schools starting in May of 1947.

On May 23rd, 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was founded; a few months later, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was established in the Soviet occupation

their life and work, a *Vorlass* is, by contrast, the same kind of collection put together while the corresponding person is still alive. Cf. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Schweizerische Nationalbibliothek und Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, *Ressourcenerschließung mit Normdaten in Archiven und Bibliotheken (RNAB) für Personen-, Familien-, Körperschaftsarchive und Sammlungen: Richtlinie und Regeln*, 2019: 115.

zone on October 7th. The location of the Abramowitz family's home in Berlin-Johannisthal meant they were residents of the GDR, though not citizens, as their Austrian citizenship had been reinstated by then.

At some point during her studies, Abramowitz was introduced to author Arnold Zweig, who had returned from exile in Palestine and settled in East Berlin in 1948. She became a regular guest in his household, typewriting letters for Zweig's wife, the painter Beatrice Zweig. As her studies at Humboldt University neared completion, her desire to be a teacher for the rest of her working life waned. When it became a topic of conversation with Arnold Zweig, he put her in contact with Max Schroeder, chief editor of Aufbau-Verlag, the main publisher of his books since Zweig's return from exile.² Founded only in 1945, Aufbau-Verlag had quickly become one of the most important publishing houses in the GDR.³

The meeting between Schroeder and Abramowitz proved fruitful, and, after passing her university exams in 1951, Elga Abramowitz began work as an editor – chiefly for English and American literature – at Aufbau-Verlag in April of 1952. The publishing house would remain her main employer until the reunification of the two German states in 1990.

The Internal Assessments for Aufbau-Verlag

Elga Abramowitz's position included not only editorial work and, later on, translations from the English language, but also required her to function as an assessor. This meant writing assessments (*Gutachten*) for texts being considered for publication in Aufbau-Verlag, as well as for those books which had already been accepted by the publishing house and were now being prepared for print. A necessary step for any book published in the GDR was its traversal of the procedure to obtain a print permit (*Druckgenehmigungsverfahren*). While this procedure undoubtedly played an important role as a component of the GDR's planned economy where resources like paper were limited, it is also generally acknowledged to have been the GDR's form of censorship. To receive a print permit, an individual application had to be submitted to the responsible governmental authority for every single book.⁴ The application included one or more assessments of the book in

² More on Max Schroeder, who – unlike most other socially and politically active figures in the GDR – had been in exile in the United States, can be found in Ulmer, *Man muss sein Herz an etwas hängen, das es verlohnt*, 2020:40ff. For insight into his personal life, see *Love in Exile: An American Writer's Memoir of Life in Divided Berlin* (1999), written by Schroeder's wife Edith Anderson.

³ For an overview of Aufbau-Verlag's history, see Wurm, *Jeden Tag ein Buch* (1995) or Ulmer, *Man muss sein Herz an etwas hängen, das es verlohnt* (2020).

⁴ The authority responsible for the print permit process changed names and affiliations several times. For a better overview, see Barck, Langermann and Lokatis, "Jedes Buch ein Abenteuer", 1997:19–21. These print permit files have, to a large extent, been digitized and made available online through the *Bundesarchiv*. Siegfried Lokatis in particular has done extensive research on these files, for further reading see his collection of essays *Verantwortliche Redaktion: Zensurwerkstätten der DDR* (2019), or, for a humorous look at the topic, *Zensurspiele: Heimliche Literaturgeschichten aus der DDR* (2008).

question, including one usually written by the editor responsible for the book within the publishing house.⁵

However, it is the first mentioned type of assessment we will be turning our attention to here: the assessments concerning manuscripts and texts considered for publication in Aufbau-Verlag. While the assessments meant for the print permit process were carefully composed in order to convince the authorities that the book in question was appropriate for the GDR's public, the other assessments were a bald appraisal of the relevant work's suitability for publication by Aufbau-Verlag and were only to be read internally by those responsible for new acquisitions within the publishing house. The main difference therefore lies in the intended audience.

Of the 76 total assessments composed by Abramowitz and surviving in her *Vorlass*, 22 were deemed to have been written for internal use by Aufbau-Verlag for a number of reasons, such as phrasing, resulting publication, as well as other factors.⁶ They offer an intriguing view of the internal practice of manuscript and text assessment and subsequent acceptance or refusal for publication in the GDR's Aufbau-Verlag.

The 22 internal assessments in Abramowitz's *Vorlass* can be divided into three different categories depending on the linguistic origin of the text examined: German-language texts, English-language texts, and texts translated into German. The assessments generally follow the same structure as the assessments for the print permit process: first, the author and/or context of the work is discussed, followed by a summary of the plot, and concluding with Abramowitz's critical opinion and recommendation of a course of action.

What follows is a brief overview of these assessments, including a number of excerpts, as well as a discussion of the recommendations Abramowitz expressed within them and their resulting effects on the relevant text's publication. Although a majority of the assessments are undated, an attempt was made to present them in loose chronological order based on the publication date(s) available. For the purpose of better readability, my English translations of the excerpts are in the article text, while the original German-language quotes can be found in the footnotes. If the title of the original work is in German, a rough translation is provided in the footnote; in case of translations, the original title is given, also in the footnote. The catalogue of the German National Library as well as the print permit files themselves served as a method of confirming whether or not the texts in question were published. Unless otherwise stated, the assessments are undated.

⁵ A detailed description of the components of an application for a print permit can be found in Thomson-Wohlgemuth, *Translation under State Control*, 2009:100–104.

⁶ A complete typology of the assessments in Abramowitz's *Vorlass* will be included in my forthcoming dissertation.

German-Language Texts

Four of the internal assessments in the *Vorlass* are assessments of German-language manuscripts. Of these, Abramowitz rejects two, has many suggestions for improvements for one, and approves of the other – with a caveat.

Alfred Maderno's *Die Erkenntnis der Hedwig Gert*, which chronicles the titular figure's conversion to the Socialist cause, was never published by Aufbau-Verlag.⁷ The withering review provided by Abramowitz may well have been the cause; in her introduction to the two-page assessment, she states: "The manuscript '*Die Erkenntnis der Hedwig Gert*' is utter nonsense. The plot isn't right, the people aren't right, and the style isn't right either," and she concludes with: "The author's occasional attempts at humor fail miserably every time; the funny parts are as contrived as the rest of the manuscript."⁸

Another manuscript is also rejected based on its narrative quality, though Abramowitz's judgement is not quite so harsh in its case. Wally Eichhorn-Nelson's *Aus der guten alten Zeit* is a collection of four stories set in the Thuringian Forest in the 1880s.⁹ The stories describe the merciless poverty of the families living in a glassblower community but, as Abramowitz writes, offer not much more than that. She advises against the publication of the planned anthology. No works by Eichhorn-Nelson were published by Aufbau-Verlag, though she had more success elsewhere, e.g., with Greifenverlag Rudolstadt.

In her nine-page assessment of Heinz Kamnitzer's *Arnold Zweig: Erster Versuch einer Biografie*, Abramowitz, likely asked for her judgement based on her long acquaintance with Zweig, does not articulate a clear overall opinion.¹⁰ However, she does disagree with his title, writing:

Prof. Kamnitzer calls his manuscript a first attempt at a biography. Perhaps it would have been better if he had given it the subtitle 'A Study' in order to avoid misunderstandings, as the reader, who expects a description of Zweig's life that is as complete as possible and is based

⁷ The title roughly translates to *The Realization/Awakening of Hedwig Gert*.

⁸ Original text: "Das Manuskript '*Die Erkenntnis der Hedwig Gert*' ist ein Schmarren. Die Handlung stimmt nicht, die Menschen stimmen nicht und der Stil stimmt auch nicht [...] Der Versuch zum Humor, den der Autor gelegentlich macht, scheitert jedesmal kläglich; die lustigen Stellen sind genau solcher Krampf wie das ganze übrige Manuskript."

⁹ Translates to *From the Good Old Days*.

¹⁰ Translates to *Arnold Zweig: First Attempt at a Biography*. The historian and author Heinz Kamnitzer's work on Arnold Zweig, while celebrated in the GDR, has been viewed in a more negative light in non-GDR publications, e.g., Vietor-Engländer, "Marx, Herzl, oder deutsch-jüdische Symbiose?", 1989:81. After the German reunification, Kamnitzer's activity as IMB "Georg" for the Ministry for State Security (Stasi) was made public, cf. Walter, *Sicherungsbereich Literatur*, 1996: 41. This shed an entirely new light on the nature of his friendship with Zweig, cf. von Sternburg, *Um Deutschland geht es uns*, 2004: 263.

on proven facts, is disappointed. The author by no means attempts to provide a comprehensive biography. His work is a hybrid between a biography and a literary essay.¹¹

Instead of a definitive statement in favor of or against – which perhaps she was not asked for in this case – Abramowitz provides a critical commentary as well as recommendations for how to improve and expand the manuscript. The fate of the manuscript is difficult to determine, not least because this assessment is undated. Neither the print permit files, nor the catalogue of the German National Library show an Aufbau-publication on Arnold Zweig by Heinz Kamnitzer.

The last assessment in this category was written for Erich Maria Remarque's *Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben*, a more complicated case. Remarque's novel about World War II experienced through the eyes of a German soldier had already appeared in West Germany in 1954, the same year it was published as *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* by Harcourt, Brace and Company in New York, translated by Denver Lindley. Several other countries also published the translated novel in 1954. However, it was the West German version that proved problematic. By comparing the English, Norwegian, and Danish versions of *Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben* with the West German Kiepenheuer & Witsch publication, the latter had been found to have been altered.¹² The East German author F.C. Weiskopf, following up on this, had found a number of changes made to the German version which greatly lessened the emphasis on German culpability (cf. Weiskopf 1955).¹³ Shortly after, Aufbau-Verlag acquired a license to publish the novel in the disputed Kiepenheuer & Witsch version – presumably because it was the only one available in German – and aimed to do so in 1957. In her assessment, dated August 20th, 1956, Abramowitz picks up on the discourse regarding the differences between the versions and expresses great concern about the possible implications: "I think printing the ending in the mutilated Kiepenheuer version without a comment is questionable, because the changes made tend toward a decisively neofascist distortion, which is worse than all of the other 'corrections' and omissions, no matter how large or small."¹⁴ Due to licensing agreements, however, Aufbau-

¹¹ Original text: "Prof. Kamnitzer nennt seine Arbeit den ersten Versuch einer Biographie. Vielleicht wäre es besser, er hätte ihr den Untertitel 'eine Studie' gegeben, um Mißverständnissen aus dem Wege zu gehen, denn der Leser, der hier eine möglichst lückenlose Lebensbeschreibung auf Grund belegter Fakten erwartet, wird enttäuscht. Der Verfasser strebt keineswegs biographische Ausführlichkeit an. Seine Arbeit ist eine Kreuzung von Biographie und literarischem Essay."

¹² For more on this case, see also Schneider's afterword "Die Sucht nach Flucht': Zu Erich Maria Remarques 'Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben'" in Remarque, *Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben. In der Originalfassung mit Anhang und einem Nachwort von Thomas F. Schneider* (2018).

¹³ Published in East German periodical *neue deutsche literatur*.

¹⁴ Original text: "Ich halte es für bedenklich, den Schluß kommentarlos in der verstümmelten Kiepenheuer-Fassung zu drucken, weil durch die vorgenommenen Änderungen eine ganz entscheidende neofaschistische Tendenz-Verfälschung bewirkt wird, die schwerer wiegt als alle noch so umfangreichen Auslassungen und sonstigen 'Korrekturen.'"

Verlag was legally obligated to print the Kiepenheuer & Witsch version without making any changes. *Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben* was published in 1957.¹⁵

English-Language Texts

Abramowitz's tasks also included assessing English-language texts for Aufbau-Verlag. For these, she needed to consider not only whether or not they should be published by Aufbau-Verlag at all, but also whether or not they were worth having translated into German. These assessments are distinguished from the others by markers such as the use of the original English-language title, quotes in English, as well as the fact that the books in question had not been translated into German before or been published in German-speaking countries. Furthermore, when assessing texts translated from the English, Abramowitz often comments on the translation itself – within these assessments, she does not, and even goes so far as to suggest a suitable translator at times. A short overview of the four undated assessments which fall into this category follows.

The libretto *Peter Grimes* is judged favorably. Abramowitz recommends that “[t]he translation and publication is to be endorsed, if only for the sake of stimulating young librettists and composers,” yet no translation and publication follow this recommendation, possibly due to the nature of the text, which would have made it rather difficult to find a suitable translator.¹⁶ Abramowitz likely read Montagu Slater's *Peter Grimes and other poems*, published by John Lane in 1946, as she refers to other, shorter poems in the book, which she judges less important and not worth publishing.

For her assessment of Sybille Bedford's *A Legacy*, Abramowitz refers to the 1957 Weidenfeld & Nicolson edition, as recorded in her writing's heading. In this case, she advises against publication, stating:

*I do not think we can attest to the author's 'absolute understanding of social values' (from our point of view) or the 'authenticity of the social environment'. Despite its technical mastery, the novel is inadequate for us. It is unquestionably an amusing read, but we require more: a societal truthfulness, which I think is lacking here.*¹⁷

¹⁵ Although Aufbau-Verlag could not make changes to the text of *Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben* itself, an article listing all of the changes found between the Kiepenheuer & Witsch version and the English version was published in the East German periodical *neue deutsche literatur* the same year the novel appeared. See “Der kastrierte Remarque” (1957).

¹⁶ Original text: “Die Übersetzung und Herausgabe ist, schon zur Anregung junger Librettisten und Komponisten, zu befürworten.”

¹⁷ Original text: “Ich glaube, wir können der Autorin weder einen ‘absoluten Sinn für soziale Werte’ (von unserem Standpunkt aus) noch ‘Echtheit des Milieus’ bescheinigen. Für uns reicht der Roman trotz seiner formalen Gekonntheit nicht aus. Er ist zweifellos eine amüsante Lektüre aber wir brauchen mehr: eine gesellschaftliche Wahrhaftigkeit, die mir hier zu fehlen scheint.”

A Legacy is not published by Aufbau-Verlag, or any other East German publishing house. Unlike the previous titles, Henry James' novel *Washington Square* does end up appearing in Aufbau-Verlag. As she does with *A Legacy*, Abramowitz includes the edition she read (Dell Publishing Co. Inc., New York, 1959) as well as the number of pages, possibly to give Aufbau-Verlag an idea of the cost of translation or the amount of paper needed for publication.

I recommend publishing 'Washington Square' as our next Henry James novel, as a kind of counterweight to the very artificial and weak 'Gesandten'.¹⁸ The novel is suitable for a large print run and, like most classic novels, can always be reissued. Ana Maria Brock as translator would ensure a good German text. I think a picture would be appropriate for the cover, but one should choose a very good graphic artist.¹⁹

Aufbau-Verlag publishes the novel as *Die Erbin vom Washington Square* in 1975, translated by Ana Maria Brock, as Abramowitz had recommended.

The last remaining assessment in this category is Tennessee Williams' *Moise and the World of Reason*. Abramowitz writes:

Due to its homosexual details, this novel will immediately provoke intense arguments, and many will buy it for that reason alone. But all of that should not prevent the publishing house from publishing it, because its literary quality is high, its societal significance is without question, and a mature society must be able to cope with such a book.²⁰

Aufbau-Verlag assigns the novel's translation to Abramowitz herself; it is published with the title *Moise und die Welt der Vernunft* in 1984.

¹⁸ Original English title: *The Ambassadors*. Published by Aufbau-Verlag in 1973, also translated by Ana Maria Brock.

¹⁹ Original text: "Ich empfehle, 'Washington Square' als nächstes Werk Henry James' herauszubringen, sozusagen als Gegengewicht zu den sehr artifiziellen und dünnblütigen 'Gesandten'. Der Roman trägt eine hohe Auflage und kann immer wieder neu aufgelegt werden wie die meisten klassischen Romane. Ana Maria Brock als Übersetzerin würde für einen guten deutschen Text sorgen. Für den Umschlag erschiene mir eine Bildlösung angebracht, aber man sollte einen sehr guten Grafiker wählen."

²⁰ Original text: "Der Roman wird wegen seiner homosexuellen Details sofort heftige Diskussionen auslösen, und viele werden ihn einzig deshalb kaufen. Aber das alles sollte den Verlag nicht davon abhalten, ihn zu veröffentlichen, denn seine literarische Qualität ist hoch, seine gesellschaftliche Signifikanz steht außer Frage, und eine mündige Gesellschaft muß ein solches Buch verkraften können."

Translated Texts

This category is the largest of the internal assessments for Aufbau-Verlag, comprising a total of fourteen documents. In addition to critiquing the content and overall style of the work, Abramowitz often also comments on the translation. The works Abramowitz advises against publishing are discussed first, then those she is in favor of, and, lastly, those for which she has no concrete recommendation.

Negative

Abramowitz criticizes nearly every aspect of Alois Jirásek's *Eine Philosophengeschichte*: its structure, its content, and the work done by the unnamed translator, which Abramowitz takes issue with for being done in a style reminiscent of Hedwig Courths-Mahler, a writer of popular romance novels criticized for being cliché, formulaic, and generally of low quality.²¹ This book was not published by Aufbau-Verlag, nor does it appear to have been published elsewhere in Germany, East or West.

Ben Jonson's play *Der Alchemist*, translated by Kurt Karl Doberer, also fails to earn a place in the publishing house. Abramowitz finds its jibes at the superstitious beliefs common at the time of its creation outdated and only suitable for amateur drama groups, if at all.²²

Kung Chueh and Yuan Ching's novel *Töchter und Söhne* is rejected more decisively.²³ East German readers should be spared a novel such as this, according to Abramowitz, as "this novel [...] is a forbidding example of how not to do it."²⁴ Specifically, she finds the "consistent black-and-white thinking" and the "fast-paced progression of events without a hint of lovingly artistic characterization, atmosphere, or style" problematic.²⁵ In her conclusion, she writes:

The book was undoubtedly written with the commendable goal of glorifying the national resistance of a people against their oppressor. But you cannot do that how it is attempted here, you can't let your heroes talk to each other using only political buzzwords, forego any kind of individual characterization, and attempt to replace the lack of skill with an excess of tightly

²¹ Original Czech title: *Filosofská historie*.

²² Original English title: *The Alchemist*.

²³ In the German National Library catalogue, the authors' names are written as Kung Djüe and Yüan Ding. According to the catalogue, the work was translated into German by Eduard Klein using an English translation, likely *Daughters and Sons*, translated from the Chinese by Sha Po-li and published in 1952 by Liberty Press, New York.

²⁴ Original text: "Dieser Roman [...] ist ein abschreckendes Beispiel dafür, wie man es keinesfalls machen darf."

²⁵ Original text: "konsequent durchgeführte[n] schwarz-weiß-Malerei [...] den jagenden Gang der Ereignisse und jegliches Fehlen liebevoller künstlerischer Ausgestaltung in Charakterzeichnung, Kolorit und Stil."

packed events. At times, the book [...] desperately reminds me of Karl May – Karl May in Chinese clothing. [...] The book will do more harm than good.²⁶

While this novel subsequently does not appear in Aufbau-Verlag, it does appear in a different East German publishing house: The print permit files reveal Volk & Welt applied for a permit for a book entitled *Söhne und Töchter* in December of 1953.²⁷ A handwritten note in the corresponding files leads to the title the work finally appeared under: *Schüsse am Bayangsee*, published in 1954.²⁸

Ilse Losa's work *Die Welt, in der ich lebte* is a more convoluted case. While it is a German text written by a German author, it was translated by the author from the original language – Portuguese. Ilse Losa, who was Jewish, fled to Portugal in 1934 to escape Nazi persecution.²⁹ In 1949, she published her first novel, *O mundo em que vivi*, in Portugal.³⁰ The text Abramowitz assesses is a translation by Losa of her own work, made clear through Abramowitz's phrasing in her criticism: "The weakest aspect of the manuscript is undoubtedly its style [...] It frequently seems as if the author has forgotten the correct German words and turns of phrase."³¹ Ultimately, Abramowitz recommends refusal of the manuscript, with the following reasoning:

*I would be very pleased if a book dealing with Jewish topics appeared in our publishing house, but I cannot in good faith recommend Ilse Losa's manuscript for publication, even after it had been thoroughly edited for style. [...] A novel aiming to describe the fate of German Jews up to the year [19]33 should be more intelligent, shrewder, sharper, clearer, more forceful – in short, should be written from a higher perspective than this one. [...] all she shows is that Jews are just like everyone else, and that, in my opinion, is not enough.*³²

²⁶ Original text: "Zweifellos ist das Buch mit der lobenden Absicht geschrieben, den nationalen Widerstand eines Volkes gegen seine Unterdrücker zu verherrlichen. Aber man kann das keinesfalls so tun, wie es hier versucht wird, man darf nicht seine Helden nur in politischen Schlagworten miteinander reden lassen, auf jede individuelle Charakterzeichnung verzichten und die fehlende Kunst durch ein Übermaß an dichtgedrängten Ereignissen ersetzen wollen. Das Buch erinnert mich [...] manchmal verzweifelt an Karl May – Karl May im chinesischen Gewand. [...] Es würde mehr Schaden als Nutzen bringen." Karl May, like Courths-Mahler, was a prolific writer of popular adventure novels.

²⁷ Translates to *Sons and Daughters*. Bundesarchiv, DR 1 (Ministerium für Kultur)/5021. Volk & Welt presumably applied for a print permit for the text after Aufbau rejected it, which would date the assessment to somewhere between 1952 (the year Abramowitz began working for Aufbau) and 1953.

²⁸ Translates to *Shots at Lake Bayang* (possibly Poyang Lake).

²⁹ For further reading on Losa, see Pereira Nunes, "Ilse Losa (1913–2006)" (2016).

³⁰ Translates to *The World I Lived In*.

³¹ Original text: "Die schwächste Seite des Manuskripts ist zweifellos der Stil. [...] vielfach scheint die Autorin die korrekten deutschen Worte und Wendungen vergessen zu haben."

³² Original text: "Ich würde es sehr begrüßen, wenn ein Buch mit jüdischer Thematik in unserem Verlag erschiene, aber Ilse Losas Manuskript kann ich nicht mit gutem Gewissen zur Herausgabe empfehlen,

Die Welt, in der ich lebte, translated from the Portuguese by Maralde Meyer-Minnemann in collaboration with the author, is eventually published by Beck und Glückler of Freiburg in 1990.

Abramowitz's assessments of two novels by Edita Morris are ultimately negative, as well. After publishing *Die Blumen von Hiroshima*, Aufbau-Verlag apparently considered publishing further Morris novels such as *Sampeh*, *Roman einer Schiffsreise* and *Die Saat von Hiroshima*, which appeared in Süddeutsche Verlag München in 1962 and 1965, respectively.³³ Abramowitz notes she used the 1962 edition of *Sampeh* for her assessment of that novel, but uses the English title *The Seeds of Hiroshima* for the second Morris novel, perhaps because she was asked to assess it prior to Süddeutsche Verlag's publication of the translated novel in 1965.³⁴ While Abramowitz does not address Sophie Angermann's translation of the novels, she remains unimpressed by their respective plots and overall quality, and deems them too weak to appear in Aufbau-Verlag. She concludes her appraisal of *Sampeh* with:

*I think we should content ourselves with the publication of 'The Flowers of Hiroshima', Edita Morris' best book. 'Sampeh' is much too weak a novel for us to consider it for our publishing house. A commendable view of the world does not suffice in the field of literature. We must spend what little foreign currency we have on more significant books.*³⁵

Similar criticism can be found in her assessment of *The Seeds of Hiroshima*: "In my opinion, 'The Seeds of Hiroshima,' the redundant and very weak sequel to a successful book that hit a nerve, should not be published. We would not be doing the author any favors but harm

auch nach einer gründlichen stilistischen Bearbeitung nicht. [...] Ein Roman, der es unternimmt, die Schicksale deutscher Juden bis zum Jahr 33 zu verfolgen, müßte intelligenter, tiefsichtiger, schärfer, klarer und eindringlicher – kurz von einer höheren Warte aus geschrieben sein als der vorliegende. [...] sie zeigt nur, daß Juden genau solche Menschen sind wie alle andern, und das ist meines Erachtens zu wenig."

³³ *The Flowers of Hiroshima* first appeared in 1959, *Sampeh*, *Roman einer Schiffsreise* was published as *Echo in Asia: A fictional travelogue* in 1961, and *The Seeds of Hiroshima* in 1965. All three of these novels were translated by Sophie Angermann and first published in Germany in Munich's Süddeutsche Verlag.

³⁴ The assessment of *The Seeds of Hiroshima* is nevertheless not listed in the previous category, as the use of the English title alone with no other supporting evidence – the assessment is undated – is not sufficient proof. In her assessment of Ethel Voynich's *Die Stechfliege*, for example, Abramowitz also uses the English title, although she criticizes the translation of the novel in her assessment, which means she must have been reading the translation.

³⁵ Original text: "Ich glaube, daß wir es mit der Herausgabe der 'Blumen von Hiroshima,' dem besten Buch von Edita Morris, bewenden lassen sollten. 'Sampeh' ist ein allzuschwaches Werk, als daß wir es für unsere Verlagsproduktion in Betracht ziehen könnten. Eine lobenswerte Gesinnung allein reicht in der Literatur nicht aus. Unsere wenigen Devisen müssen wir für wesentliche Bücher ausgeben."

her instead.”³⁶ While Aufbau-Verlag follows her advice regarding *Sampeh* – and indeed, Süddeutsche Verlag remains the novel’s only German publisher – it does end up publishing *Die Saat von Hiroshima* in 1966.

Icelandic author Halldór Stefánsson’s *Erzählungen*, a collection of stories, also does not receive positive feedback in Abramowitz’s assessment:

*In conclusion, the publication of Stefansson’s novellas cannot be endorsed on the basis of these stories. [...] Three of the four stories lead only to the conclusion that Halldor Stefansson is a writer with original ideas who has an idealistic view of life and whose social criticism does not go beyond a rather superficial satire of the ‘good society’ of a past epoch.*³⁷

When ascertaining whether or not the book ended up being published by Aufbau-Verlag or not, it at first seemed to have been published under the title *An Islands Küsten* – also a collection of stories by Halldór Stefánsson – in 1975.³⁸ However, upon closer examination, it came to light that the latter book contains 14 stories, while *Erzählungen* was comprised of four. There is an overlap in content: the two novellas judged best out of the four in *Erzählungen* appear in *An Islands Küsten*. While Abramowitz does not discuss the translator(s) or the translations in her assessment of *Erzählungen*, Bruno Kress – known primarily for translating the works of Icelandic Nobel prize winner Halldór Laxness – is recorded as the translator for the stories in *An Islands Küsten*.

Positive

Despite its emotional themes – “we are used to the emotional understatement of modern novels and sensitive to a strong emphasis on emotions” – Abramowitz deems Ethel Voynich’s *Die Stechfliege* appropriate for the publishing house, if Elsa Wasmuth’s “very mediocre” translation is carefully revised.³⁹ Despite this recommendation, the work does

³⁶ Original text: “‘The Seeds of Hiroshima’, die überflüssige und literarisch sehr schwache Fortsetzung eines geglückten Buches, das ein weites Echo auslöste, sollte man meines Erachtens nicht publizieren. Man täte der Autorin keinen Gefallen damit, man würde ihr im Gegenteil nur schaden.”

³⁷ The title simply translates to *Stories* or *Novellas*. Original text: “Zusammenfassend ist zu sagen, dass auf Grund der hier vorliegenden Erzählungen eine Herausgabe der Stefanssonschen Novellen nicht befürwortet werden kann [...] Drei der vier Geschichten aber lassen lediglich den Schluss zu, dass Halldor Stefansson ein Schriftsteller mit originellen Einfällen ist, der das Leben von einem idealistischen Standpunkt aus betrachtet und dessen Gesellschaftskritik nicht über eine ziemlich oberflächliche Satire gegen die ‘gute Gesellschaft’ einer vergangenen Epoche hinausgeht.”

³⁸ Translates to *On Iceland’s Coast*.

³⁹ Original English title: *The Gadfly*. Original text: “Wir sind heute, gewöhnt an das Gefühls-Understatement moderner Romane, empfindlich gegen sehr starke Gefühlsbetonung.”; “sehr mäßige Übersetzung”

not appear in Aufbau-Verlag, but in Verlag Neues Leben two years later (the assessment is dated December 30th, 1955) with the title *Der Sohn des Kardinals*.⁴⁰

The assessment for Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Das Haus der sieben Giebel*, dated February 17th, 1956, has a similar fate: Although Abramowitz has the highest praise for the translation Harry Kahn provided for Zurich's Manesse Verlag, writing that he "translated not only elegantly, but precisely, and found excellent solutions for all of the difficulties present in the English text", the novel is never published by Aufbau-Verlag.⁴¹ Instead, it appears seven years later in Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag as *Das Haus mit den Sieben Giebeln*, translated by Friedrich Minkwitz and Noa Kiepenheuer.

In her assessment of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Der Junker von Ballantrae*, Abramowitz discusses whether or not the book is suitable for Aufbau-Verlag in remarkably frank terms, writing:

*Asked whether this novel represents a significant enrichment for us, my answer must be no. It does not have the quality of Walter Scott's novels, in which the class conflicts of an English period of history are fought out with all the hallmarks of a romantic work. [...] However, a publication in our Erzähler-series can be endorsed, as the book cannot have politically negative effects and, as mentioned above, it has properties which make long parts of it a pleasure to read.*⁴²

In addition, she praises the translator, Lore Krüger, who "put a great deal of effort into the translation and successfully attempted to replicate Stevenson's style in all its subtleties."⁴³ Aufbau-Verlag publishes the novel in 1959.

Theodore Dreiser's novel *Das Bollwerk* is met with unadulterated enthusiasm.⁴⁴ This assessment first seemed to belong in the category of untranslated English-language works due to its final line: "The German reader should be made familiar with 'Bollwerk' in a good

⁴⁰ Translates to *The Cardinal's Son*.

⁴¹ Original English title: *The House of the Seven Gables*. Original text: "[...] nicht nur elegant, sondern auch genau übersetzt, und für alle Schwierigkeiten des englischen Textes ausgezeichnete Lösungen gefunden hat."

⁴² Original English title: *The Master of Ballantrae*. Original text: "Vor die Frage gestellt, ob dieser Roman für uns eine wesentliche Bereicherung darstellt, muss ich mit nein antworten. Er hat nicht die Qualitäten der Romane Walter Scotts, in denen sich bei allem romantischen Dekor die Klassenkämpfe einer englischen Geschichtsepoche spiegeln. [...] Eine Publikation in unserer Erzähler-Reihe aber ist zu vertreten, denn politische negative Wirkungen kann das Buch nicht haben, und, wie schon oben gesagt, es hat Eigenschaften, die seine Lektüre lange Strecken hindurch zu einem Vergnügen machen."

⁴³ Original text: "[...] bei der Übersetzung grosse Mühe gegeben und den Stevensonschen Stil in allen Feinheiten mit Erfolg nachzubilden versucht."

⁴⁴ Original English title: *The Bulwark*.

translation as soon as possible.”⁴⁵ However, the print permit file regarding the publication reveals Aufbau-Verlag had acquired a license from Diana-Verlag Konstanz to print *Das Bollwerk*, translated by Carl Bach.⁴⁶ Another document in the *Vorlass* related to Aufbau-Verlag's publication of the title is able to shed some light on these seemingly contradictory pieces of information. In the document, comprising a single page and with the heading “Protokoll,” Abramowitz writes:

*I am not very pleased with this translation. While it reads fluently, it becomes clear how much the translator simplifies and flattens when compared to the original. [...] He changes sentence structures, often consolidating several sentences into one even though there is no need for it. [...] The translation pales in comparison to others, such as Frau Dr. Schumann's 'Stoiker'.*⁴⁷

This turns her comment about “a good translation” in the assessment into a barb – although it does not seem to have had an effect, as *Das Bollwerk* appears in 1961, in Carl Bach's translation.

Ambiguous

The assessments of three final novels distinguish themselves from the others in that Abramowitz does not recommend a clear course of action. Instead, she limits herself to presenting author, context of the text's creation, plot, and, in a few cases, a discussion of the translation. This deviation may be due to the fact that the publication of the relevant texts by Aufbau-Verlag was not in question, for reasons which will be addressed for each title.

The earliest work which Abramowitz neither rejects nor endorses is a further Theodore Dreiser novel. In her assessment of *Der Titan*, Abramowitz refers to Marianne Schön's translation of the first part of the novel, which was interesting as *Der Titan* is generally acknowledged as having been the work of prolific translator Wilhelm Cremer. After a closer look at Abramowitz's summary, the assessment headed “Der Titan” reveals itself to be an assessment of the entire “Trilogie der Begierde,” which comprises three parts, the second of which is *Der Titan*.⁴⁸ Thus, Abramowitz's discussion of Schön's translation

⁴⁵ Original text: “Der deutsche Leser sollte so schnell wie möglich in einer guten Übersetzung mit dem ‘Bollwerk’ bekannt gemacht werden.”

⁴⁶ Bundesarchiv, DR 1 (Ministerium für Kultur)/3967.

⁴⁷ Original text: “Ich bin von dieser Übersetzung nicht sehr entzückt. Sie liest sich zwar ganz flüssig, aber beim Vergleich mit dem Original sieht man, wie sehr der Übersetzer vereinfacht und verflacht. [...] Er verändert die Satzformationen, zieht oft mehrere Sätze in einen zusammen, obwohl dafür gar keine Notwendigkeit besteht. [...] Die Übersetzung hält keinen Vergleich aus etwa mit der des ‘Stoikers’ von Frau Dr. Schumann.”

⁴⁸ The fact that Abramowitz refers to the trilogy by the title of the second book was likely influenced by Paul Zsolnay Verlag's previous publication of the trilogy with the overall title *Der Titan*. Original English title: *Trilogy of Desire*, comprising *The Financier*, *The Titan*, and *The Stoic*.

actually relates to the first part, Dreiser's *Der Finanzier*. The remaining two parts, *Der Titan* and *Der Stoiker*, were translated by Wilhelm Cremer and Eva Schumann, respectively.⁴⁹ Assuming her assessment was written prior to the 1953 publication of the first Aufbau-edition of the first novel, *Der Finanzier*, two previous Dreiser novels – *Eine amerikanische Tragödie* (1952) and *Schwester Carrie* (1953) – had already been judged appropriate for East German audiences. Thus, the publication of further works by Dreiser may have been viewed as a natural progression and little cause for concern.

Interestingly enough, despite Cremer and Schön's translation having already been published in the 1920s by Paul Zsolnay Verlag, Abramowitz finds many faults with them, mainly with Schön's:

*The translation is not particularly good. The English original can often be felt through strongly. The 1st part, translated by Marianne Schön, would definitely need to be thoroughly edited. It is much worse than the other two parts, which had other translators and have already been edited again. The 1st part is also exceptionally careless when it comes to punctuation [...]*⁵⁰

Halldór Laxness' novel *Gerpla*, translated by the previously mentioned Bruno Kress, was the author's ninth novel (and tenth publication) to be published by Aufbau-Verlag.⁵¹ An author who had thus far been met with approval was unlikely to suddenly fall into disgrace and find his string of publications interrupted without cause; it is possible the publication of *Gerpla* was simply not in question. Abramowitz's assessment may have been a kind of confirmation that the novel did not contain anything questionable that needed to be addressed before it could continue on the road toward publication. Her last line in her assessment for the novel reads: "The publishing house should consider if it might not be time to

⁴⁹ The "Trilogie der Begierde" was previously published by the Austrian Paul Zsolnay Verlag in 1928 according to the German National Library catalogue. While the catalogue entry does not list the translators for the trilogy, further research indicates Marianne Schön likely translated *Der Finanzier*, while Wilhelm Cremer translated the other two parts. Although the print permit files for the original Aufbau-Verlag editions from 1953 for *Der Finanzier* and *Der Titan* are not recorded, the German National Library catalogue entries record Schön as translator of the first part, Cremer for the second, and Schumann for the third. The print permit file for the 1954 edition of *Der Stoiker* shows that Eva Schumann was commissioned to translate the novel. Why Wilhelm Cremer's version from Paul Zsolnay Verlag could not be used instead remains unclear.

⁵⁰ Original text: "Die Übersetzung ist nicht besonders gut. Man spürt oft stark das englische Original durch. Der 1. Teil, von Marianne Schön übersetzt, müsste auf jeden Fall noch einmal gründlich überarbeitet werden. Er ist sehr viel schlechter als die beiden anderen Teile, die einen anderen Übersetzer haben und auch noch einmal überarbeitet worden sind. Der 1. Teil ist auch, was die Interpunktion betrifft, ausserordentlich unsorgfältig [...]"

⁵¹ The original Icelandic title is also *Gerpla*.

suggest Prof. Kress for one of the national prizes already awarded to various other translators.”⁵² *Gerpla* is published in 1977.

Similarly, *Frauen in Boston* is one in a line of novels by author Henry James to be published by Aufbau-Verlag.⁵³ Abramowitz praises the translation of the novel, stating: “The novel was superbly translated into German by Ana Maria Brock, who previously translated ‘Washington Square’, ‘Die Gesandten’, and ‘Die Prinzessin Casamassima’ for Aufbau-Verlag.”⁵⁴ She goes on to discuss the title to be chosen for the upcoming novel, suggesting either “Die Bostonerinnen” or “Frauen in Boston”, as the West German edition carries the title “Die Damen aus Boston”. *Damen in Boston* is published in 1985.

Conclusion

In general, Aufbau-Verlag trusted Abramowitz’s judgement and followed the recommendations she gave in these internal assessments, as can be seen in the graph below.

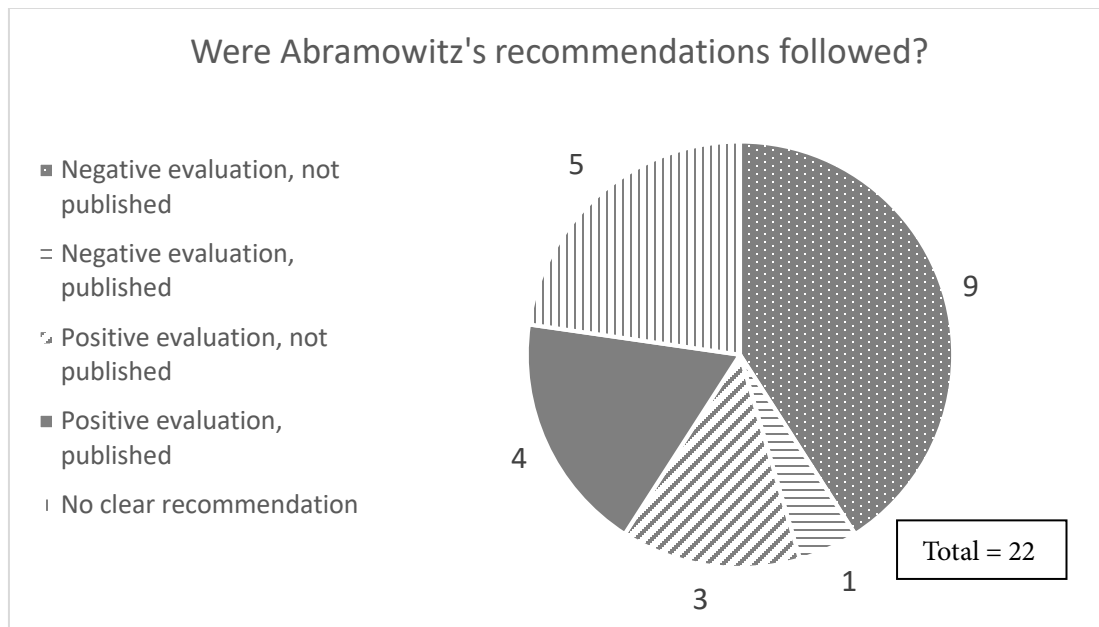


Figure 1: Abramowitz’s Recommendations

⁵² Original text: “Der Verlag sollte überlegen, ob es nicht an der Zeit wäre, Prof. Kress für eine der staatlichen Auszeichnungen vorzuschlagen, die verschiedenen anderen Übersetzern bereits zuteil wurden.” Kress did indeed receive a prize for his translations in 1978, awarded by Aufbau-Verlag. Other recipients of the translation prize first established and awarded by Aufbau in 1978 were, in that same year, Werner Creutziger, Christel Gersch, Hartmut Herboth und Gustav Just. See Wurm, *Jeden Tag ein Buch*, 1995: 515.

⁵³ Original English title: *The Bostonians*.

⁵⁴ Original text: “Der Roman wurde von Ana Maria Brock, die bereits ‘Washington Square’, ‘Die Gesandten’ und ‘Die Prinzessin Casamassima’ für den Aufbau-Verlag übersetzte, vorzüglich ins Deutsche übersetzt.”

Of the 17 assessments in which she gave a clear opinion, her recommendations were followed in 13 cases, giving her a success rate of 76%. Only one text she had advised against – Edita Morris’ sequel *Die Saat von Hiroshima* – was published. It is important to note that these 22 assessments are unlikely to represent the sum total of assessments Abramowitz composed for Aufbau-Verlag; they are simply the ones which – for whatever reason – remained in her possession to be included in her *Vorlass*. She generally typed her assessments on her typewriter at home (having one was a very rare privilege at the time) and was thus able to create multiple copies at one time. This also explains the sheer number of other types of documents now preserved in her *Vorlass*.

A key aspect to keep in mind is that while Abramowitz does not solely represent her own opinion in these assessments, it is certainly present. Her judgement is, however, at its core, based on the perception of suitability for Aufbau-Verlag. In the internal assessments, she criticizes the low literary quality of some of the texts, deeming them unsuitable for publication specifically in Aufbau-Verlag, which had a reputation as a publisher of quality literature to uphold. In fact, one of the most interesting things revealed by the assessments is this emphasis on literary quality. Ideological issues are often not even mentioned, while quality is one of the most common reasons for Abramowitz’s issuance of a negative or positive recommendation and deemed even more important than ideological suitability in some cases. This is most clear in Abramowitz’s vehement opposition to the publication of *Töchter and Söhne* – despite its ideologically didactic function – due to its low literary quality. Abramowitz also explicitly rejects *Die Erkenntnis der Hedwig Gert* and *Sampeh* for this reason in the face of their ideological suitability: Despite the titular Hedwig Gert’s chronicled conversion to the Socialist cause, the quality of the writing is, as Abramowitz determines, too low to publish; regarding *Sampeh*, she writes “‘*Sampeh*’ is much too weak a novel for us to consider it for our publishing house. A commendable view of the world does not suffice in the field of literature.”

Yet ideological issues are close at hand when she rejects Bedford’s *A Legacy*, stating “Despite its technical mastery, the novel is inadequate for us. It is unquestionably an amusing read, but we require more: a societal truthfulness, which I think is lacking here”. On the other hand, Abramowitz does recommend the publication of Stevenson’s *Der Junker von Ballantrae* even though it does not provide “significant enrichment for us” as it “cannot have politically negative effects and [...] has properties which make long parts of it a pleasure to read”. Low literary quality therefore seems to disqualify ideologically suited texts, while high literary quality can sometimes but not always make up for a lack of ideological correlation. The importance the assessments place on literary quality may reflect Abramowitz’s personal opinions, the status of the Aufbau publishing house, or indeed the movement away from publishing decisions based solely on ideological congruence to an emphasis on literary quality, which took place in the 1960s.⁵⁵ In the case of the assessment

⁵⁵ See Barck, Langermann and Lokatis, “*Jedes Buch ein Abenteuer*“, 1997:168–169.

for *Töchter and Söhne*, however, which was likely composed in 1952 or 1953, this shift in attitudes would not have taken place yet.

Abramowitz's use of plural pronouns in some of the assessments also raises questions. While it is fairly clear she is referring to Aufbau-Verlag when assessing *Washington Square* – “I recommend publishing ‘Washington Square’ as our next Henry James novel [...]” – and *Sampeh* – “I think we should content ourselves with the publication of ‘The Flowers of Hiroshima’ [...]” – other instances seem less clear. In the assessment for Stevenson's *Der Junker von Ballantrae*, for example, she writes: “Asked whether this novel represents a significant enrichment for us, my answer must be no”. Who is Abramowitz referring to in these cases? While it is possible she is referring to Aufbau-Verlag, it seems more likely that she means the general public of the GDR. Since each book to be published had to be found worthy by the state authorities and go through the print permit process, this undoubtedly influenced Abramowitz's decision-making process. Several other clues scattered throughout the assessments confirm this. Another facet influencing Abramowitz's recommendations, as she mentions in her assessment of *Sampeh*, concerned the acquisition of licenses for publication. Purchasing a license to re-print books from West German publishing houses was expensive, as it required the use of foreign currency, which was in limited supply.

To conclude, the assessments should be viewed as a collection of small case studies and are therefore not suitable for drawing generalizing conclusions, as they portray how one individual viewed these particular works in light of publication in a very specific publishing house in a particular historical and political environment. As a whole, this examination of Elga Abramowitz's internal assessments for Aufbau-Verlag aims to provide a first glimpse of the material contained in her *Vorlass*, as well as offer some insight into how decisions were made regarding which books to publish and how much power and influence someone like Abramowitz could have on the publishing landscape.

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