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## **Cooperation Between Latvian and German Libraries: Impressions from Berlin**

At the end of 2025, from 18 to 19 December, four representatives of Latvian libraries – from the National Library of Latvia, the Riga Stradiņš University Library, and the Pārventa Library in Ventspils – went on a study visit to Berlin to strengthen the Latvia–Germany partner country initiative for 2025–2028. The visit provided valuable insights, paving the way for closer cooperation, joint activities, and participation in the major BiblioCon congress in Berlin from 19 to 22 May 2026.

The visit began with an online meeting of the Latvian–German partnership group, during which significant agreements on future cooperation were reached. Shared topics of interest for library professionals from both countries were identified and discussed, including the role of libraries in promoting democracy and democratic processes, open science and citizen science, and library operations under conditions of limited financial resources. Possible forms of cooperation included webinars, participation in thematic weeks (such as Library Week and Open Access Week), joint publications, articles about Latvian libraries in German professional journals, interviews with German librarians on the Latvian Library Portal, closer cooperation between twin cities and more.

An agreement was reached to hold regular joint online meetings in an expanded format, supplemented by thematic lectures. Each lecture will feature guest speakers from both Latvia and Germany. The first lecture will take place on 13 February at 11:00 EET (10:00 CET) and will focus on the library systems of each country.

Over the course of two days, the Latvian delegation also visited six libraries differing in content and function: a national (state) library, a university library, a special library, and three public libraries. Each offered a unique perspective on the role of libraries in contemporary society.

### **Berlin City Library (*Berliner Stadtbibliothek*)**

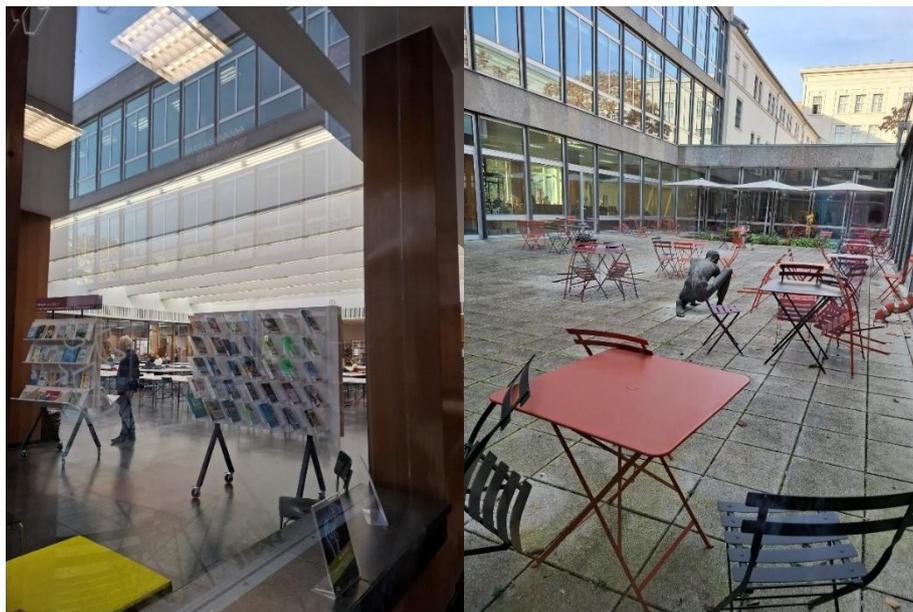
The Berlin City Library has two branches. One is located in a historic building at Breite Straße 30–36. Its origins date back to 1901. However, after World War II the building fell within the Soviet zone of influence (East Berlin). At that time, a new public library branch was established in the American sector. The two branches were merged into a single organizational structure in 1995. In the future, both collections, staff, and services are planned to be consolidated into new premises located in a redeveloped section of a shopping center (with the library and shopping center operating under one roof).

At present, it is difficult to ensure appropriate conditions for collection storage in the library buildings, as significant interior improvements cannot be made because both buildings and their furnishings are listed as cultural heritage, which limits possible alterations.



*BID representative Juliane Pranke and the Latvian librarians' group*

The city library organizes many regular events for different target audiences – the December events calendar was full of diverse activities. The library also has a beautiful inner courtyard that is actively used during the warmer months.



*Berlin City Library (Breite Straße)*

### **America Memorial Library (Amerika-Gedenkbibliothek)**

The second building of the Berlin City Library – the America Memorial Library – was established in 1954 as a gift from the U.S. occupation forces to the people of Berlin. Two years ago, in autumn 2023, an 800 m<sup>2</sup> extension called [Pop-Up](#) was opened next to the main building. Essentially, it is a large, flexible community and event space that community representatives can reserve for non-commercial events.

The *Pop-Up* extension also includes restrooms, showers, and several smaller rooms: media labs where users can record audio and video, use 3D printers, and rooms with carpets for yoga, dance, music, presentations, and other activities. All of these services are provided free of charge.



*Pop-Up extension of the America Memorial Library*

The library organizes its own events, but most activities are implemented by NGOs and community representatives. On average, about 1500 events take place annually. For certain activities, the library hires professional mediators to help ensure neutrality and an inclusive environment. The library is designed as a safe and courageous space for dialogue. Recent examples include discussions between Israeli and Palestinian communities living in Germany about the war in the Middle East.

The library includes a café, a library of things, an art library (paintings and sculptures), scanning stations, audiovisual stations with a wide range of players and headphones, thematic shelves (e.g., for the queer community), stationery vending machines, and visual diary corners supporting reader well-being and psychological balance, where visitors can share their emotions and impressions.

At the America Memorial Library, the Latvian group attended two presentations – one about the *Pop-Up* space and another about the *Digital Zebra* project, which helps residents resolve technology-related issues with the support of library consultants. Staff do not do tasks on behalf of users, but instead engage in joint exploration, helping visitors find answers and improve digital skills. The project began in 2019 and was initially planned to run until 2025, but due to its popularity and positive results, it has now been extended until 2028.

### **Berlin State Library (*Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin*)**

The Berlin State Library impressed with its large-scale renovation and strict silence discipline. The Latvian group visited the Unter den Linden branch, where the tour was led by Olaf Hamann, Head of the Eastern Europe Department and a long-standing cooperation partner of the National Library of Latvia. During the two-and-a-half-hour tour, the group learned about the library's history – from its imperial beginnings to the present day.

The library has two branches, one in former East Berlin and one in West Berlin. A user flow monitoring system allows staff to see the occupancy of both buildings and the number of available reading seats.

Freie Arbeitsplätze



108

Potsdamer Straße



204

Unter den Linden

*Number of available seats in Berlin State Library buildings*

Currently, the library is open to all visitors, which poses challenges due to heavy tourist traffic. From January 2026, only registered readers will be allowed to stay in reading rooms. Tourists will have access only to public spaces and exhibitions and may register for guided tours.

The electronic catalog helps users locate materials on reading room shelves by providing virtual paths to exact locations. The library includes a children's literature reading room with historical children's books and original illustrations, mainly used for research. Rare materials reading rooms are also available, where pens and liquids (including water) are prohibited. These special collections have reduced opening hours.

Overall library hours are Monday–Saturday 8:00–22:00 and Sunday 10:00–18:00. When only security staff are on duty and no librarians are present, only general reading rooms and open-access collections are available. Silence is strictly enforced. Individual study cabins are also available and are highly demanded.



*At Unter den Linden building*

More than ten years ago, the Unter den Linden building underwent extensive renovation that respected its historical status while expanding reading rooms and increasing seating capacity. An impressive library museum with collection highlights was created, along with a temporary exhibition space where exhibitions change every three months. In December, an exhibition on Jewish documentary heritage and religious texts was on display.

The library also commemorates staff members of Jewish origin who perished or emigrated during Nazi Germany – their names are engraved on metal plaques embedded in the pavement on Unter den Linden Street near the library entrance.

### **Federal Foreign Office Library**

The Federal Foreign Office Library proved surprisingly large and rich. It is led by Karen Schmohl, President of the BID. This is a special library, accessible to external users only in exceptional cases – when a specific resource is unavailable elsewhere. Nine librarians work there, fulfilling information requests during business hours.

Every German ministry and state institution has its own specialized library with trained professionals. Most of the library's budget is invested in online information resources, as topics of interest change frequently and first appear in electronic journals and publications. Electronic resources are also accessible to Foreign Office staff serving abroad.

The library has a small rare books collection. Several rare books were evacuated to a farm outside the city during World War II, saving them from destruction.



*Old catalog of the Federal Foreign Office Library*



*With the Head of the Federal Foreign Office Library, Karen Schmohl*

### **Karow Library (Pankow District)**

A particularly warm meeting took place at the Karow branch of the Pankow District Library, where Latvian librarian Ieva Ketzner works. The library is located on the first floor of a school (lyceum), with small staff rooms on the second floor. Seven staff members work at the library, though only a few are full-time and one is volunteer. Some primarily serve as assistants, organizing the collection and preparing books for lending. The collection contains about 23,000 items: 16,000 books, 1,600 DVDs, 2,300 music CDs, and over 200 games. The collection is entirely open-access. Shelving has been lowered by removing top sections to make the space more open and less oppressive.

Materials ordered from other branches are delivered quickly. The collection is regularly reviewed, and items not borrowed for several years are withdrawn to make room for new acquisitions. Foreign-language materials are available in English, Spanish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish.

The library also offers a “library of things” (almost all items were checked out during our visit) and provides parking for a community cargo bicycle with a front trailer, available for a symbolic rental fee. Staff sometimes use it to transport grills to refugee centers and organize community barbeques. Books can also be delivered outside the library, particularly during outreach events at refugee centers.

The library hosts a German language club, book clubs, and other events for different age groups. It has an event space used both for library-organized activities and by local residents and associations when their own spaces are too small. Exhibitions are regularly held there. The Latvian community celebrates seasonal and other holidays in this library, organizing dance and singing events, sometimes jointly with the Lithuanian community, which is well represented in Pankow.



*Karow Library colleagues warmly welcomed the Latvian group*

Overall, Berlin has more than 80 public libraries, organized into regional clusters across the city's 12 administrative districts and maintained by the local municipality. Latvian libraries hosted a visit by librarians from the Pankow region in June 2025, and were glad to make a return visit.

### **Berlin University of Technology (TU Berlin) Library**

The final stop of the trip was the Berlin University of Technology Library. It is an academic library that shares a central library building with the Berlin University of the Arts. The building has five above-ground floors and one underground level housing closed storage and open-access periodicals storage. Four floors are used by TU Berlin, while the fifth floor is for the University of the Arts library.

The collection comprises approximately 3 million items (books, periodicals, and other materials). The library uses a local classification system – the Regensburg system, common in Germany. The collection covers a wide range of study and research fields, including engineering, natural sciences, mathematics, computer science, physics, economics, and other academic disciplines, reflecting the university's teaching and research programs. Technical and natural sciences dominate. The library also houses special collections, such as the Archive of the German Horticultural Library, which specializes in horticulture, landscape architecture, garden art, etc.



*Atrium of the TU Berlin Library*

The central library building is open 24/7, with certain access conditions at night and on weekends. This is a pilot project, and its results will be evaluated from multiple perspectives. Some areas, such as open-access periodicals in the basement, are available only during regular hours.

The library offers electronic resources, e-books, scholarly articles, databases, interlibrary loans, and research consultations. It does not organize exhibitions or events unrelated to reader education. Several free scanning stations are available. Silence is maintained, though group work rooms are provided and frequently used.

Corridors feature cardboard time discs similar to parking discs, which users can display when leaving individual or group study rooms for up to 60 minutes. Visitors also have access to aids such as desk lamps, laptop stands, and can purchase colored earplugs. Special rooms are available for student mothers with children, as well as relaxation zones with puzzles, plants, and flat surfaces for short rests.

The library has a mood wall, a separate feedback wall, and visually clear statistics and survey results based on user feedback from the previous year.



*Christmas market visiting experience*

During the trip, closer ties were established with the *Bibliothek & Information Deutschland*. Such contacts form the foundation for a stable and sustainable international partnership, enabling Latvian libraries not only to learn, but also to share their achievements on a European scale.

It was a beautiful and bright Christmas season, and the group fully enjoyed the festive atmosphere. The Latvian participants are grateful to BI-International for financial support and to Juliana Pranke for organizing all professional visits to the organizations of our interest. Special gratitude to our Berlin library colleagues, who generously shared their time through presentations, conversations, and inspiring visits – it made our visit truly memorable.