Investment in Democracy

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To afford a critical inspection and encourage an intelligent appraisal of the results of the money the United States has invested in promoting local democratic institutions in Germany, HICOG’s Public Affairs Office in Nuremberg took a score of German newspapermen on tour of some of the special projects in northern Bavaria.

This rural, conservative area of approximately 3,800,000 inhabitants is one of the most secluded and poorest in western Germany, lacking in wealthy industrial centers, except for Nuremberg and Schweinfurt, and bordering on two hundred miles of the Soviet Zone of Germany and communist Czechoslovakia.

Yet the newsmen learned that HICOG’s DM 3,800,000 (equivalent to $904,400) granted to 65 projects in this region had been more than matched by German contributions in land, building materials and cash in order to take advantage of the American assistance.

The US funds for these projects were from nearly DM 54,000,000 ($12,852,000) in counterpart funds—German currency accruing to the US Government in return for dollar economic aid provided Germany—allocated to 473 special projects in Western Germany and West Berlin to assist fledgling institutions of democracy in German cities and villages achieve stability and influence.

The “HICOG Special Projects Program” was initiated by US High Commissioner John J. McCloy in early 1951 to build, refurbish and equip schools, universities, student dormitories, youth homes, community centers and other local institutions. In nearly every case, the German applicants put at least fifty percent of the cost in cash or materials. Every application was carefully reviewed by American officials.

After the tour last fall of the projects in northern Bavaria, the consensus of the newsmen’s opinion as expressed in lengthy newspaper stories was that “the American funds helped Germans help themselves to strengthen grassroots democracy.”

Among the score of representative projects, which they visited, was the Vocational School at Wunsiedel, a backwoods town located at the very edge of the free world, only a few miles from the “Iron Curtain.” Dr. Karl Borchardt, principal of the school, had long been dissatisfied with the state of Germany’s vocational training as provided 90 percent of Bavaria’s youth who were too poor to go to high school and university. Leaving school at 14, these youth took apprentice jobs in factories and farms and spent one day a week in the vocational school studying the technical aspects of their trade. No thought was given to teaching them civics and preparing them for responsible citizenship in a society in which they would constitute a majority.

After getting the backing of town and state, Dr. Borchardt went to HICOG with some new ideas. He wanted to expand his instruction from four or five trades then offered to twenty or more, so that every youth would have a reasonable expectancy to find work which he liked. He wanted not only to serve the youngsters from the environs of Wunsiedel, but from the entire county. He wanted to develop the interest and support of parents for the school—unheard of in prewar Germany—and most important of all, he wanted to train youth for good citizenship. A grant of DM 200,000 ($47,600) from HICOG, plus the equivalent of DM 600,000 ($142,800) in land and building materials from German sources, has enabled him to build modern workshops, classrooms and living quarters, and to realize his ideas.

The newspapermen were impressed with the student-made charts, drawings, and outlines on the walls and stacked in classrooms which showed the composition of...
local and national governments, the platforms of the political parties in the last local election, and the results of the election. It was obvious that these boys and girls were not only learning to be electricians, bakers and seamstresses, but that they were learning how to vote, how they are governed and how to organize for civic action.

Another innovation in the Wunsiedel school, which HICOG insisted upon in all its grants to vocational schools, was the institution of a full-time, five-day-a-week class for vocational students. This was designed as an experiment to demonstrate to German authorities the need and advantage of providing more education to the greater part of their youth.

Recognizing that universities would produce a major portion of Germany's future leaders, HICOG put a substantial part of its Special Projects funds into the institutions of higher learning, primarily for student welfare. This was deemed urgent because of the alarming situation of the majority of university students, who worked part-time, lived in rented rooms—sometimes garrets or cellars—and had few facilities for developing the social interests and healthy community spirit which is an automatic part of American campus life.

At Erlangen University, the German correspondents inspected a six-story student dormitory, housing 300 young men and women, which was built with the aid of DM 100,000 ($23,800) of HICOG funds. In addition to its airy architectural style, and modern living facilities, the building included a large meeting hall and reading lounges on every floor. Residents of each floor elect their own representative to a student council which administers the student home and organizes a yearly program of concerts, lectures and forums to get students out of their academic specialties into a democratic community life. Such innovations in student living were prerequisites for every HICOG grant to a university.

New student home at Erlangen, assisted by HICOG funds, houses 300 students and provides facilities for extra-curricula activities organized by the students. (USIS photo)

Labor-union youth center near Nuremberg provides summer vacations for working youth from all parts of western Germany and training courses in citizenship and responsible labor leadership in the winter.

In Hirschaid, Mayor Georg Kügel proudly showed the newsmen through a new building which had become a meeting point for farm women from miles around. The renovated three-story building was equipped with electric washing machines, pressers, canning equipment, a bakery kitchen, sewing machines, showers and bathtubs. The building also included a pleasantly furnished meeting room equipped with a small library. The sociological significance of this institution was quickly apparent when one woman explained: "It used to take me more than two days to do the family washing. Now I can do it all in a half-day, even though I have to walk a half hour from the next village."

For the first time, the overburdened farm wife of this community has a little free time of her own, to meet with her friends, to develop a little social life, and perhaps, to read a newspaper and think about the public affairs of her community. Already a local women's organization has developed to use the meeting room upstairs, which is also in frequent demand by youth groups and for town meetings. Through such small beginnings as this farm women are beginning to free themselves from household slavery and wield their rightful influence in the community.

At Lohr on the Main River, newsmen saw a new community center which has now become the civic and social hub of village life. Equipped with a large auditorium, film projection apparatus, a small restaurant and offices for local organizations this center is constantly used for many events ranging from public forums on civic improvements to community dances. A total of DM 90,000 ($21,400) was contributed from the HICOG Special Projects funds, with a German outlay of DM 133,000 ($31,654).

Continued on page 12