The Documentation Office
for East European Law: 1953-1978*

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The emergence of the Soviet Union as a superpower and the extraordinary extension of its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe after the Second World War provided a strong incentive for the study of the legal systems of the USSR and its East European allies. At the same time, the political developments in Eastern Europe caused a considerable number of persons with unusual legal and linguistic skills to emigrate to the West. These two factors explain the impressive growth of Soviet and East European legal studies in the West in the years after the Second World War.

The first solid core of such studies was at the Library of Congress, where the Mid-European Law Project began publishing *Highlights of Soviet and East European Legislation* in 1954. This project was headed by Dr. Vladimir Gsovski, who was assisted by Dr. Kazimierz Grzybowski and a staff consisting of a number of lawyers from several East European countries.

At the Faculty of Law of the University of Leyden, the first overt signs of an interest in the study of East European law can be traced back to 1948. At the end of that year, Dr. Zsolt Szirmai (born 1903), a prominent Budapest attorney, visited Holland for a few days in connection with an international arbitration case in which he represented a Hungarian party. During his stay in Holland, he discussed the political situation in Hungary—and his desire to emigrate—with a Dutch colleague, Mr. Y. Scholten, a leading lawyer from the Hague (he served as Minister of Justice in the Marijnen cabinet from 1963-1964). Scholten was also the son-in-law of Professor F. M. Baron van Asbeck, who was dean of the Leyden Law Faculty at that time. A meeting between van Asbeck and Szirmai was arranged, during which the former expressed the faculty's interest in developing East European legal studies. There had always been a tradition of foreign law studies at Leyden, and van Asbeck, who taught public international law, and his close colleagues Professor R. D. Kollewijn (private international law) and Professor J. H. A. Logemann (constitutional law), were impressed by Szirmai's personality, and felt that here was an opportunity for expansion in an unexplored field and, at the same time, for honoring the national tradition of hospitality to persons fleeing political or religious oppression. Accordingly, they

* I gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Mrs. Szirmai and Mr. K. Wiersma who provided information on the first years of the history of the Documentation Office. Mr. Wiersma, now a judge in the Supreme Court of the Netherlands, was Secretary to the Curators of Leyden University in 1953.

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invited Szirmai to come to Leyden as privaat-docent to lecture on comparative and East European law.

After various difficulties, the Szirmai family succeeded in leaving Hungary in August 1949. Szirmai himself crossed the border at night with a suitcase full of Hungarian law books. He was appointed a privaat-docent in Leyden, which entitled him to residence in Holland, but which was a largely honorary position otherwise. From January 1950 to April 1951, Szirmai lectured in Leyden and then took up employment in London. During his stay in England he kept his post in Leyden, where he returned now and again to lecture. The Leyden Law Faculty had become convinced of Szirmai's talents as a comparative lawyer, and was keen on attracting him permanently to Leyden. A Hungarian lawyer by education, Szirmai was fully at home with Austrian and German law, and quite knowledgeable about English and French law.

By 1953 the University of Leyden had managed to overcome the administrative and financial obstacles to creating a properly salaried position for East European legal research, and Szirmai was appointed as from October 1953; he and his family had returned to Holland the month before.

At that time Soviet law was still almost a blank spot on the comparative lawyer's map, and the first and most basic task therefore was the collection of materials. This was also reflected in the name given to the new unit within the law faculty: Documentation Office for East European Law. During the first year of its existence, the Documentation Office consisted of Szirmai alone, who was given an office and a small budget for buying books. Szirmai tackled his new job with the boundless energy which was part of his character, and already during the last months of 1953 he made contact with Gsovski, whose advice he sought, and with several Soviet libraries with whom exchange relations were established.

In the original view of Kollewijn, who acted as the new institution's mentor during its first few years, the main emphasis was on making available, to the Leyden Law Faculty and the Dutch legal profession at large, basic information about the legal systems of Eastern Europe. To this end, Kollewijn arranged for permanent space for the Documentation Office in a leading Dutch law review, Rechtsgeleerd Magazijn Themis. As he pointed out in his foreword to the first contribution under this arrangement:

"The first aim of the Documentation Office is the collection of information concerning the law of present-day Soviet Russia and other East-European countries under communist rule, including Yugoslavia, and the scholarly analysis of this information." 1

Although Szirmai always took his commitments to the Dutch legal community very seriously—for many years he kept members of the Leyden faculty informed of new works in their fields published in Eastern Europe—he also worked hard at expanding a network of international contacts. One of the first of a long line of prominent visitors to the Documentation Office was Professor Nicholas S.