

The End of National Histories?

Veranstalter: Thomas Dahms / Margarete Tiessen, Cambridge University

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The symposium and workshop were primarily focussed on the distinctiveness and/or connectedness of historical scholarship in the United Kingdom and in Germany. As a symposium primarily attended by German history scholars and German-born academics (with significant overlap), German history and the experience of German historians in British academia dominated the day.

After an opening speech by MARGARETE TIESSEN (Cambridge) emphasising the dual themes of independence and intersection, the day started with a public panel primarily composed of German speakers who had studied at Cambridge during their post-graduate education. Much of the discussions within the panel entailed reflection on their career trajectories, what had appealed to them about Britain in the first place and where they currently situated themselves in the national historiographies. This continued in the discussion of future paths for scholars and scholarship.

MAIKEN UMBACH (Nottingham) called attention to the transnational character of contemporary scholars and scholarship. She challenged a sharp distinction suggested in the symposium title between German and British historiographies, noting that having spent her academic career in the UK she was unsure where to categorise her own work having not experienced being 'the German' in academic settings. Reflecting on the current state of the discipline, Umbach emphasised the value of public engagement. In particular, anticipating later comments about the difficulty engaging British students in German history, she emphasised work to reform school curricula as well as make German history accessible to public audiences, developing interest.

While Umbach touched on areas where the UK could improve, PATRICK BAHNERS (F. A. Z.) touched on areas where German histo-

rians could learn from the British. Bahnners reflected on his own interest in history and how his former approach to history had been challenged and shaped in his university experience at Cambridge. Emphasising his long-time experience with the F.A.Z., Bahnners commented on the success in Germany of academic works on German history from British academics. According to him this is due to a difference in writing style that was more engaging and accessible than the more academic style of German historiography.

Two of the speakers continued the discussion on how the disciplines could improve by suggesting directions for future research. KONRAD JARAUSCH (Chapel Hill) presented a perspective from outside the German-British divide that framed the symposium and reflected on his long experience of German historiography from the United States. He noted the dominance of the Holocaust in German history writing and especially teaching and called for more variety in subjects and frames. JAN RUEGER (Birkbeck) made the case for a reappraisal and resurgence for comparative and trans-national approaches. Rueger emphasised the value of the nation state as a frame for research and for understanding history, noting that alongside an emphasis in viewing history at the regional and global level, the nation remained an important category of analysis.

STEFAN BERGER (Bochum) admitted at the beginning of his introduction that by contrast with the rest of his panel, and indeed most of the attendees of the symposium, he had never been trained at Cambridge and had instead done his PhD at Oxford. Studying labour movements comparatively but also in both countries, his work had spanned the national historiography divide. Like most others Berger mentioned how he saw Britain as more hospitable for his research as an early career researcher. However, reflecting experience of the decades since, Berger warned of the changing conditions of academia in Britain, change that had contributed to his return to the German system. If there were lessons to be learned here, they were warnings about the direction the UK academia is headed to.

After a lunch break, the symposium con-

tinued with the first workshop panel, including presentations more directly addressing the symposium theme. As an emergent topic, this panel tended to emphasise the influence of national and academic institutions in shaping historiography.

Medievalist LEN SCALES (Durham) gave a high-spirited presentation on the differing approaches to the understanding of 'Europe' by scholars of medieval Europe between English and German historiography. Scales noted that German medievalist historiography was more engaged in and influenced by contemporary political debates than British counterparts. Considering the pressure for or against European integration surrounding scholarship, Scales noted the particular emphasis on connecting medieval history to latent Europeanisation in German historiography. Scales also noted the significance of exhibition culture in the German discipline.

JAN TATTENBERG (Oxford) similarly presented the differences in the approaches to history between the countries, focusing on military history and the related histories of conflict. This presentation emphasised the role of institutions on the practice of history beyond the structures of academia and instead the institutional links between the state, military and academia as well as the effect of these relationships on amateur historiography. The background and sub-disciplinary identity of researchers were identified as important in shaping national historiography rather than national location.

DANIEL SIEMENS (Newcastle) reflected less on the differences between the existing historiographies of Germany and Britain and continued the point regarding how the legacies of academic institutions shape scholarship. Siemens noted that much of German history is less exceptional when framed as the most western nation of the east rather than being on the eastern edge of the west and suggested reframing Germany towards Eastern Europe. This carried into another consideration of institutions, how the placing of German history within Western European Studies to be studied by those trained to compare Germany with Western European countries conditioned scholarship. As a comparison, Siemens discussed working within a Slavic

Studies department.

The second and final workshop panel was defined by a return to debates from the post-war era. This more contemporary subject matter led both presentations to touch on how intellectual currents, in and outside historiography, impact broader cultural milieus.

MARTINA STEBER (Munich) gave a discussion of political language and political ideologies in the context of the concept of conservatism in the UK and Germany, noting how this concept was shaped by the different political languages in the countries. This emphasised the challenges in carrying out the comparative research advocated for in the introductory panel. Steber noted that translation between historical traditions is not just a matter of different languages but properly understanding the contents thereof. Beyond methodological discussion, Steber also pointed to the connections drawn by political elites and intellectuals through the twentieth-century, how Europeanisation and international linkages had influenced domestic intellectual circles. This point mirrored the symposium to some extent, especially considering how the later twentieth century had weakened the borders between national intellectual traditions.

Following this, Patrick Bahnert returned, this time discussing recent works by Heinrich August Winkler and returning to the well-worn arguments regarding the *Sonderweg*. Bahnert presented a lengthy rebuttal to Winkler's critique of immigration policies surrounding the „migrant crisis“. This led to a consideration of nationalism and exceptionalism beyond historiography and into contemporary public culture. In particular, Bahnert mooted the role of historians to intervene in this culture.

Closing the day, RICHARD J. EVANS (Cambridge) gave a keynote on the past half century of German-British interaction on history and reflected on the current status of German history in British academia, noting some fairly depressing trends. To discuss this presentation he was joined by Konrad Jarausch. Evans noted the uncertainty facing the discipline due to threats to funding exacerbated by the Brexit, public attention and curriculum tailored to British history and a lack

of German language ability for potential researchers. As such, German history in the UK was presented as increasingly marginalised and reliant on German immigrants and the independently educated to fill classes and carry out research. Both noted that recent decades had been a highpoint in international scholarship but suggested that it would be difficult to maintain interest and support for such a collaboration.

The symposium returned many times throughout the day to a pattern of thought so often criticised by historians: nostalgia. Nostalgia for a time when British academia, particularly Cambridge, had provided an outlet for young researchers from the strictures of German academia and instead enabled a culture of independence and freedom; a time when the discipline was thriving with links developing between the nations and a public appreciation for histories of Europe. Against such a rosy vision, the current state of the discipline, with financial pressures, tight managerialism, and a monoglot myopic public, is a necessarily dispiriting and negative trend. The participants and attendees generally basked in enthusiasm for their discipline and one another's work. However, in response to questions asking for positive actions that could be taken to address the problems, consensus frayed. This left the impression of a community pleased with its progress to present but concerned for its future.

Conference Overview:

Thomas Dahms / Margarete Tiessen (both Cambridge): Welcome and Opening

Panel Discussion

Patrick Bahners (Frankfurt am Main) / Stefan Berger (Bochum) / Konrad Jarausch (Chapel Hill) / Jan Rueger (Birkbeck) / Maiken Umbach (Nottingham): Anglo-German Relations in Historiography, Past and Present
Chair: Timothy Schmalz (Cambridge)

Panel I

Chair: Mary-Ann Middelkoop (Cambridge)

Len Scales (Durham): Making Medieval Europeans: Some Recent British and German Perspectives

Jan Tattenberg (Oxford): Demilitarising Mili-

tary History? Anglo-German Historiography in/on Conflict

Daniel Siemens (Newcastle): Writing Modern German History from the East

Panel II

Chair: Sabine Lee (Birmingham)

Martina Steber (Munich): National Trajectories and European Horizons: British and West German Conservatism after 1945

Patrick Bahners (Frankfurt am Main): How Not to Be Special: Heinrich August Winkler on Germany and the West

Keynote

Sir Richard J. Evans (Cambridge): British Historians and the German Past: Half A Century of Changing Perspectives

Chair: Charlotte Johann (Cambridge)

Concluding Discussion

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