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The German Federal President History Competition. A Public History Occasion

Exploring the past: New audiences and expeditions

The German History Competition

In Germany, there is a veritable landscape of student competitions that allows students to show their ability to work and think independently, to compete, and not least to obtain a meaningful position in their personal vita. Besides Olympiads in the STEM-subjects there are ‘speech clubs’ and additional offers from the humanities to kindle the participation of young people.¹ In most cases, these competitions are awarded by the government or foundations; in the case of private financing, the competitions are regularly subsidized by government funding or placed under the auspices of the politics.²

An outstanding example of an established student competition in Germany is the ‘History Competition of the Federal President’. Since 1973, the competition has been tendered by the Körber-Foundation with the aim to motivate students to engage with the history of Germany. Its regulation states: “The history competition of the Federal President hopes to awaken the interest for the own history, promote independence and strengthen a sense of responsibility in children and adolescents.”³ The methodical access is determined by ‘research-based learning’ and ‘life-world orientation’: young people get in touch with history, which took place right on the own doorstep – often continuing into the present. The

1 An overview of in Germany advertised student competitions can be found on the website of the ‘Arbeitsgemeinschaft bundesweiter Schülerwettbewerbe’ (*consortium of nationwide student competitions*), which has set itself the goal to promote the participation of pupils in pedagogically worthwhile and learning supporting competitions, accessed March 18, 2016, <http://www.bundeswettbewerb.de/wettbewerb.html>.

2 In most cases, this assignment is executed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the ‘Kultusministerkonferenz’ (*assembly of ministers of education of German states*) – and not least: by the German Federal President.

3 The eligibility requirements of the competition, accessed March 18, 2016, http://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/bildung/geschichtswettbewerb/pdf/2016/Teilnahmebedingungen.pdf.

competition was launched by the former Federal President Gustav Heinemann and Kurt Körber, an enterpriser and philanthropist from Hamburg.⁴

In a six-month project, students trace – often guided by their teachers – a history topic in their environment. The findings and results are elaborated on, for example, in a written report, an exhibition or through a movie. The principle of the history competition is called ‘inquiry learning’: pupils research in archives, consult experts, conduct inquiries with local politicians, carry out street surveys and perform oral history interviews with witnesses.⁵

The Competition and Public History – a combined endeavor?

It is obvious that the Competition and Public History both cover the spectrum of possible topics, as well as the methodological approach and the design and presentation of any research:

The definition and objectives of Public History research frequently includes phrases such as communication, engagement, cooperation and collaboration. These could nearly be phrases of the biennial competition description. Public History as well as the History Competition could be described as “the communication of history to the wider public” or “the engagement of the public in the practice and production of history”⁶ as it is proclaimed on the NCPH website. Thus, the term Public History is highly complex and deeply evocative as it attempts to construct a historic identity.⁷

⁴ Josef Schmid and Dirk Wegner, *Kurt A. Körber. Annäherungen an einen Stifter* (Hamburg: Edition Körber Stiftung, 2002), 206–225. The first competition was the result of a conversation between Kurt A. Körber and the former German President Gustav Heinemann. They talked about Heinemann’s desire to bring the democratic traditions of Germany into the public awareness. Heinemann argued that there “the benefits of Democratic pioneers of the 19th and early 20th century could bring political self-confidence” to the German public. The reflection of the roots of German democracy should lead to a positive identification with German past and promote the social understanding that a broad study of history is indispensable to establish democratic traditions.

⁵ Bodo von Borries, *German History. A Pupil’s Competition for the Federal Presidents’s Prize* (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1989), 19–27.

⁶ The website of the National Council of Public History, accessed March 18, 2016, <http://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>.

⁷ In its simplest meaning, the definition of Public History refers to an use of historical method outside the academia. See Robert Kelley, “Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects,” *The Public Historian* 1, no. 1, (1978): 16–28. Nonetheless, one thing is clear: Public History aims to convey a view of past through narrative communication in a concise, clear form; in a perspective addressed to the public.

Moreover, there is a compelling similarity in the circumstances of development of the Competition and the origin of the Public History movement. Both of them date back to the early 70s and have endured for the last 40 years. Therefore I invite you to look back with me at this period and pursue the timeline of development of Public History and the History Competition.

A new view of the past

Public History in the United States during the seventies

The Civil Rights movement in the USA during the fifties and sixties provided a new perspective on historical study which changed the relationship between the public and the history in a way that public perception and interpretation of the past were viewed as equal to that of professional academic historians.⁸ The phrase “Public History“ first formally appeared in the USA during the early seventies. Public History continued to be linked to wider socialist movements, aligned to political liberal ideals and followed democratic approaches to history, for instance with workshops and workers’ education programs.⁹ This period represented the public fighting for a voice beyond traditional authority. In some senses, Public History aimed to make the past more consensual, with individuals and organizations showing a range of interests in interpreting the past; this includes topics such as racial debates, feminism, and working-class histories.¹⁰ Historians, both academic and Public Historians, realized the active role the public could play in uncovering hidden and untold stories that provided a more comprehensive story of the past. Subsequently, the multiple “Publics” started to play a major role in historical research.

Formation of the History Competition in Germany

The German Competition has had a number of phases; more precisely the preoccupation with history is closely related to the political climate and the prevailing

⁸ Ludmilla Jane Jordanova, *History in Practise* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010).

⁹ Peter Claus and John Marriot, *History: An Introduction to Theory, Method and Practise* (Harlow: Pearson, 2012), 217.

¹⁰ Michael Scardaville, “Looking backward toward the future: an assessment of the public history movement,” *The Public Historian* 9, no. 4 (1987).

historical culture. It would be presumptuous to ascribe it a leading role, but it would also be inappropriate to see a merely reflection of social reality. In my opinion, the Competition has certainly contributed to the political and ideological consciousness of participating students and institutions.

The late sixties were a time of crisis for the cultural development of the Federal Republic. During the 1968 student revolt, a part of the intellectual youth was no longer able to share the political views and traditional views of history of their fathers' generation. An 'extra-parliamentary opposition' stood vehemently against the government and the establishment by stirring up public opinion with blockades and demonstrations.¹¹ Politically, too, this period took place against the backdrop of significant shifts: A change of government to the, until then, oppositional Social Democratic Party initiated a correction of German foreign policy – especially towards to the East.

At the same time, German historiography faced a deep crisis: for young graduates traditions were expendable, older historians clung to conventional political history of states and national-conservative viewpoints. Even the newly arising social history was referred to as irrelevant. A public pursuit of history beyond school barely took place in the years after 1945: the defeat in the war, the loss of territory and the hushed up Holocaust had left uncertainties, the study of past was sidelined.¹²

Federal President Heinemann has been requiring a re-analyzing history since his election in 1969. He called for alternative traditions to be developed instead of maintaining the lack of history: the "German freedom movement of 1848" and the existing "democratic traditions" of the Weimar Republic of 1918 should contribute to a modern and democratic image of history.¹³ Rather late, these requirements were followed in the History Competition:

11 Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung 1948–1990* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999). In the decade from the mid-sixties to 1974 Wolfrum states the establishment of a separate state of historical consciousness and a left-wing "Sonderweg" (*special path*) thesis for the Federal Republic of Germany: Historical consciousness based no longer upon ritualization but on "political discourses" (p. 353).

12 Thomas Etzemüller, *Sozialgeschichte als politische Geschichte: Werner Conze und die Neuorientierung der westdeutschen Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945* (München: Oldenbourg, 2011), 190; 262–267. See also Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik. Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit*. 2nd ed. (München: Beck, 1997).

13 Gustav W. Heinemann, "Die Freiheitsbewegungen in der deutschen Geschichte, Ansprache aus Anlaß der Eröffnung der Erinnerungsstätte in Rastatt, Rastatt 26. Juni 1974," in *Allen Bürgern verpflichtet. Reden des Bundespräsidenten 1969–1974, Reden und Schriften 1*, ed. Gustav W. Heinemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975), 36–44. For Heinemann was the manner in

History Competition 1974–1976:***Understanding German Freedom movements****

1974	The German Revolution 1848/49 <i>4,525 participants/760 contributions</i>
1975	From the German Empire to the Republic of Weimar (1918/19) <i>2,721 participants/464 contributions</i>
1976	Democratic Start 1945/46 <i>3,226 participants/505 contributions</i>

* All statistics values are taken from the website of the Körber-Foundation, accessed March 18, 2016, <http://www.koerber-stiftung.de/bildung/geschichtswettbewerb/portraet/historie.html>.

The three competitions ‘Understanding German freedom movements’ (1974–1976) called for research about the revolution of 1848–49, the founding of the Weimar Republic in 1918–19 and the new beginning in 1945–46. After initially great success, there were falls in the number of participants, so a new series of Competitions was opened:

About the mid-seventies, the crisis of political consciousness was largely overcome; in the public debate, new issues (such as the oil price shock, long-term unemployment as well as national and international terrorism) dominated. Pressing current problems, however, have not become the competition’s focus, but its development has reflected the transformation of historical consciousness and academic historiography.

The Competition became part of the rising new micro history. Moreover, a change in the kinds of sources took place. From formerly more assiduous study of literature tasks covered by the changing competitive topics, the inclusion of family estates became real: letters and diaries, photo collections, newspapers, etc. The academic social history “top down” was confronted with an interest in concrete people – within the sense of the Public History movement. Exploring students used the survey of the older generation as a research method, although the academic research of history had only discovered it in a few exceptional projects for themselves.

which a society pursues its tradition of education, essential for its future. He looked for a way off a primarily representative orientated historical culture towards “fostering history ... in front of ones own door.” [p. 40].

History Competition 1977–1979:***Social History of Everyday-life***

1977	Working-World and Technique through Changing Times 5,023 participants/1.271 contributions
1978	“Living” through the Ages 4,112 participants/991 contributions
1979	“Daily Closing-Time” and Leisure through the Ages 3,995 participants/756 contributions

Bodo von Borries, a German historian, was already engaged in the early competition (as a scientific advisor, in the jury and later by qualitative analyzes of competition entries), he soon realized that an unreflective Applied Oral History brought forth “nostalgic-romantic transfiguration” or even “drastically-pointed black outs” of the reference person’s youth.¹⁴ Fears of academics historians about the limits and difficulties of oral history seemed to have come true: The operation of memory and mental function of remembering stories needed to be considered carefully.

The new topics had, however, a reinforcing effect on the participation of the competition. The sectors ‘Working-World’ (1977), ‘Living’ (1978) and ‘Daily Closing-Time’ (1979) picked up three key areas of life, which they recorded successfully. It is astonishing in retrospect that the micro history underlying theory, the “process of civilization” by Norbert Elias¹⁵ (written in 1939) was successfully distributed from the mid-70s on; in the same time the ‘Annales school’ of French historiography¹⁶ or ‘The Social Construction of Reality’ of Berger/Luckmann¹⁷ achieved a prominent status.

14 Bodo von Borries, “Ein Übungsfeld für Selbsterprobung und Geschichtserkundung. Grundgedanke und Wandlungen des Schülerwettbewerbs,” in *Geschichte, wie sie nicht im Schulbuch steht. Der Schülerwettbewerb Deutsche Geschichte um den Preis des Bundespräsidenten*, ed. Jörg Calließ (Rehburg-Loccum: Evangelische Akademie Loccum, 1991).

15 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, Vol.I. *The History of Manners*, reprint 1st ed. of 1939, supplemented by a preface (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969).

16 The main scholarly outlet of the Annales-School has been the journal *Annales d'Histoire Economique et Sociale* (“Annals of economic and social history”), founded in 1929 by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, which both broke radically with traditional historiography by insisting on the importance of taking all levels of society into consideration and pointing out mentalities as a part of historical interest. In Germany, the Annales school was of little interest until the political upheavals 1968; an enhanced reception began only in the 1970s.

17 See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966). The social constructionist approach of Berger and Luckmann points out that the social order in which people live, can

Consolidation of Public History and the Competition in the eighties

The practice of Public History expanded in the 1980s, particularly in the USA, Australia and Canada. More and more university programs were realized. During this decade more than 50 universities in the USA arranged courses, integrating public outreach activities specifically linked to communicating and engaging the public in their past.¹⁸ Government agencies and universities came together to adopt formal approaches to investigate and communicate the history of local areas. This included working with marginalized case studies. There was a focus not just on the new research methods but also on communicating this new perspective on history.¹⁹ During this period, in the US the subfield of Public History was academically established as a valid part of history, although this was more a pragmatic engagement, and not theoretically founded.²⁰ In Germany, the national growth of, and support for, Public History developed albeit at a slower pace than in the US, whereas the theoretic grass roots and fundamentals were vigorously discussed in academic debates.²¹ But also professional historians discovered the public as their audience and wrote more and more for an interested group of non-professionals.

These new public pressures required history to justify its wider role in society. Nonetheless, in Germany the concept of Public History was still an activity principally performed by local history groups (*'Geschichtswerkstätten'*), private historians without an academic background, and individuals, usually within the working class. Non-professionals – sometimes instructed by professional historians -, were given the chance to work on a local history project.²² Academic

not be referred to an objectively constructed past but as a communicative process produced by humans themselves. By this it is evident that history contributes a reciprocal influence of cultural knowledge resources. "The symbolic universe also orders history. It locates all collective events in a cohesive unity that includes past, present and future." [92–104].

18 Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean, *People and their Pasts. Public History Today* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–15.

19 Faye Sayer, *Public History. A practical guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 12.

20 Phyllis K. Leffler and Joseph Brent, *Public and Academic History: A Philosophy and Paradigm* (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 1990), 82–97.

21 Simone Rauthe, *Public History in den USA und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Freiburg: Klartext, 2001), 154–160.

22 Etta Grotrian, *Geschichtswerkstätten und alternative Geschichtspraxis*. In *History Sells! Angewandte Geschichte als Wissenschaft und Markt*. eds. Wolfgang Hardtwig and Alexander Schug (Stuttgart: Franz-Steiner-Verlag, 2009), 243–253.

historical science animadverted these non-professionals because of their theoretical shortcomings and their uncritical identification to the explored objects.²³

Coming back to the History Competition: In January 1979 the TV-event 'Holocaust' provoked a national interest in history and the German responsibility in World War II.²⁴ Even German pupils were confronted with their grandparent's conceivable guilt. The generation of young people did not impeach their grandparents in the confrontational way their own parents had done some years ago. They asked their grandparents about the personal mistakes during National Socialism and the war in a composed manner. This opened the opportunity for a clarifying conversation between the generations. But even in the historical research it came to a new development. The personalization and demonization of Adolf Hitler changed to questions for the structure and the function of the regime.²⁵ Who was promoter, who was beneficiary of the system? The Competition reacted quickly. The next themes dealt with everyday life during the National Socialism:

It is obvious, the numbers of participants tripled compared to the last Competition about 'daily closing time' in 1979. This great number of

23 Alfred Frei and Michael Wildt, "Hirsebrei und Seifenblasen. Die Geschichtswerkstätten und ihre Kritiker," in *L'80. Zeitschrift für Literatur und Politik* 39 (1986). See also Lutz Niethammer, "Fragen – Antworten – Fragen," in *Wir kriegen jetzt andere Zeiten. Auf der Suche nach der Erfahrung des Volkes in nachfaschistischen Ländern*, eds. Lutz Niethammer and Alexander von Plato (Berlin: Dietz, 1985), 426. Niethammer, one of the most popular Oral Historians in Germany, delimitates to overstate the oral history results, especially to generalize without reflection.

24 The series tells in four parts the story of the Holocaust from the perspective of the (fictional) Weiss family, who has been German Jews. Produced in 1978, the US-miniseries aired in Western Germany in January 1979 and led to an increased public interest for the crimes committed during the Nazi era. Watched by 20 million people (about 50% of West Germans population) it first brought the matter of the genocide in World War II to a widespread public.

25 At the beginning of the eighties it were mainly the historians Martin Broszat and Hans Mommsen who shifted the perspective of historical research away from a all overlapping person of Adolf Hitler towards the structures and apparatuses of the Nazi regime. Mommsen has forcefully contended that the Holocaust cannot be reduced to Hitler alone, but was instead a product of a process of "cumulative radicalization" in Nazi Germany which led to the Holocaust. This 'functionalist' Nazi research also asked about the responsibility of individuals in the Nazi dictatorship, whereas many conservative historians emphasized the role of Hitler and a handful of vassals as instigation for all political and social developments, and thus concentrated the fault to a few prominent members of the political, military, and economic leadership of Nazi Germany. See Martin Broszat, "Soziale Motivation und Führer-Bindung des Nationalsozialismus," in *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 18, no. 4, (1970) and referring to the "cumulative radicalization" see Hans Mommsen, "Die Realisierung des Utopischen. Die 'Endlösung der Judenfrage' im Dritten Reich," in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 9, no. 3, (1983).

History Competition 1980–1985:***Outstanding Contemporary History***

- 1980/81 Everyday-life during the NS-time. 1933–1940
12,843 participants/2,172 contributions
- 1982/83 Everyday-life during the NS-time. 1940–1945
5,894 participants/1,168 contributions
- 1984/85 From the collapse to reconstruction. Everyday-life in post-war Germany
3,994 participants/708 contributions
-

contributions brought about the modification that from now on the yearly competition was changed to a biennial duration. The Nazis in former history lessons were the ‘others’, the different people. Now, it came to the surface that even neighbors and own family members were integrated in the ‘machine’ of Nazi Germany.

After years, again the number of participants was declining. During the eighties a deep pessimism came up in society: Ecologically disasters, increasing armament and impoverishment in the ‘third world’ were frequent problems in public discussion. The new series of Competitions asked legitimate questions, but admonished to reflection and foundation. In a way the series of ‘Social history of everyday life’ (1977–1979) was completed. The Competition was, year for year, related to the most obvious public theme:

History Competition 1986–1991:***Current Issues***

- 1986/87 Environment has got history
5,004 participants/1,016 contributions
- 1988/89 Our place – homeland for strangers?
5,646 participants/1,005 contributions
- 1990/91 “tempo, tempo ...” People and traffic in history
6,311 participants/1,226 contributions
-

In the year 1986 the catastrophe of Chernobyl shocked the European society and vitalized the increase of the Green party in Western Germany. Pollution and the anti nuclear movement were their salient topics in this time.²⁶ Or another

²⁶ Melanie Arndt, “Verunsicherung vor und nach der Katastrophe. Von der Anti-AKW-Bewegung zum Engagement für die ‘Tschernobyl-Kinder’,” in *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 7, no. 2, (2010).

example: At the end of the eighties the large number of late repatriates and immigrant workers that became established in the country caused a short time of right-wing violence.²⁷ Even to this unpleasant development the Competition reacted. The competition of 1988/89 animated works about homeland and strangers. To the Körber-Foundation it was important to set an example against xenophobia and for integration. Again that topic led more than 5,000 participants to join in the Competition.

It would lead too far to mention all competitions from that point on. Just let me give an overview of the topics from 1992 on:

History Competition 1992–2015:

Tendency to anthropological issues

Monuments: reminder – annoyance (1992–93) | East-West History – teenagers ask for (1994/95) | From the workhouse to addiction counseling. The history of helping (1996/97) | Rebellion, Action, Change – Protest in the Past (1998/99) | Animals in our history (2000–01) | Leaving-Arrive: Migration in history (2002/03) | Avoid a painful? Working in the history (2004/05) | Together – Against each other? Young and old in the past (2006/07) | Heroes: adored – misunderstood – lost (2008–09) | Nuisance, Outrage – Scandals (2010/11) | Foreigners – Neighbors (2012–13) | Being Different – Outsider in the past (2014/15)

Remarkable is the point that the Competition's topics changed to an anthropologic manner: The issues have been opened in the course of the development of a historical culture of a collective memory and memory handling. In times of rapid change, the resolution of traditions and self-evident employment with past seems to be an almost anthropologic human requirement.

Conclusion

The History Competition has had an important influence on the engagement with the past and history to the German public:

1. It has placed topics at the center of attention that would not have been considered in that dimension by media, school and history research.

²⁷ Wilfried Heller, Hans-Joachim Bürkner and Hans-Jürgen Hofmann, "Migration, Segregation und Integration von Aussiedlern – Ursachen, Zusammenhänge und Probleme," in *Aspekte der Zuwanderung, Akkulturation und emotionalen Bindung*, ed. Hartmut Heller (Erlangen: Verlag der Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, 2002).

2. The Competition promoted methods of research (like Oral History, street surveys and so on) being determined by the “research-based learning” and “life-world orientation”.
3. As a part of the Public History movement the Competition supported local perspectives on the past that had been unconsidered by the academic history research.
4. Social and micro history awarded a new significance.
The impact has not only been on the pupils that took part in the Contest. It has also had influence on the formulation of tasks and the development of curricula.

I will not declare the Competition only as a part of the Public History movement although it had great overlapping with the history of Public History. Anyway, the competition as well as the Public History movement were part of public interest and depended on political trends and progress. Both brought the privacy of history to the public and followed one common aim: Even the local and private is of interest. In that sense it was not only a coincidence that both had overlappings in its progress. It followed a new public orientation to anthropological questions and interests.

I will close with the finding that there is already a way of Public History education in German schools. It is of significance for a broad acceptance of Public History results in society. The History Competition supports understanding the basic principles of historical thinking and the perspective of any narration proposed by Public History.

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