

World History in Germany: New Wine in Old Bottles

By

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In December 2002, some of the most prominent scholars in the field of world history in Germany met at a conference at the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research in Braunschweig to discuss the state of their discipline at German universities and in German schools.¹ The tone of the gathering was one of restrained hopefulness mixed with a feeling that a lot still has to be done to establish world history as a major discipline of historical study. Alongside optimistic predictions that in an age of globalization and Europe's growing connections both with the "outside" world and between European states themselves world history was perfectly poised and in fact predestined to become the master discipline capable of explaining the new universe of global ties, others were more doubtful. Some participants voiced concerns about the lack of in-depth engagement with world history in German textbooks and classrooms; others pointed out that mainstream historical thought in German academia was still very much Eurocentric and that world history was still miles away from becoming the norm of historiographic thinking. All in all, the proceedings made the impression of a get-together of hopefuls who are aware of their own potential but still have to wait for the world to recognize it.

Meanwhile, fifteen years have passed since the conference in Braunschweig. It is perhaps time to ask: How is world history in Germany doing today? Has it failed or fulfilled its promise? And was it, back in 2002, in such a bad shape in the first place?

Jürgen Osterhammel, one of Germany's foremost world historians, summarized the history and the current state of the field of global history in German-speaking countries in 2009.² In the course of researching his article, he entered the word "*Globalgeschichte*" (global history) into the catalogue of the German National Library which keeps record of all titles published in German since 1913. He found that the catalogue listed scant twelve books with *Globalgeschichte* in their title.³ Today, the same search yields 127 items, a steady if not an explosive growth. The term "*Weltgeschichte*" (world history) which has been traditionally

¹ Hanna Schissler, „Tagungsbericht: Weltgeschichte und Curriculums-Entwicklung in Deutschland, 2.12.2002 – 3.12.2002,“ *H-Soz-Kult*, 4.4.2003. <http://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-204>. Accessed 22.1.2017.

² Jürgen Osterhammel, „Global History in a National Context: The Case of Germany,“ *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 20, 2 (2009): 40-58.

³ Osterhammel, „Global History,“ 42.

much more widely used in the German context and the earliest uses of which date back to the eighteenth century, has seen a far more impressive expansion: from approximately 2000 titles in 2009 to 6240 records in 2017. Although many of the titles listed turn out on closer look to be children's books or else sensationalist accounts in the vein of "murders and assassinations in world history, from Napoleon III to JFK,"⁴ still these numbers suggest not only a wide proliferation and general appeal of the term, but also a rising academic interest in the field of world history.

By this account, world history is booming in Germany: but the stacks of German academic libraries tell a different story. When you walk into the library of the history department at the university of Munich, one of the largest and highest-ranking institutions of higher education in the country, and look for books on world or global history, you will likely have a hard time finding any. The library is organized according to a system developed in the 1970s which orders books into large chronological and thematic groups, such as "Greek and Roman History", "Medieval History", "Urban History", or "Religious History". These large clusters are further divided into subgroups defined by a category most readily thought of: the nation state. French history after 1918 ends where German history after 1918 begins, German and Belgian histories do not overlap, with divisions as absolute as state borders. There is even a separate group for "Bavarian History" – but of world or global history no trace. When one tries looking for Jürgen Osterhammel's seminal work on the nineteenth-century world *Die Verwandlung der Welt* (The Transformation of the World), one of the most highly praised and influential volumes in German world history, one finally finds it stacked away in the "From the Restoration to the End of the First World War" section, in the rather nebulous subcategory "Histories". On the one hand, one cannot really blame the librarians: world history in its inclusiveness does not readily lend itself to being used as a practical organizing principle. In fact, there may be some merit to claims that world history is so broad and sometimes so amorphous it is indefinable.⁵ It is also possible to brush off library classification as a marginal factor which plays no role in the actual state of research. However, the absence of world history as a category from libraries points toward a more profound phenomenon: the almost complete institutional invisibility of world history in the German academic system.

⁴ Harry Wilde, *Der politische Mord: Morde und Attentate in der Weltgeschichte. Ihre Hintergründe, Triebkräfte und Folgen. Von Napoleon III. bis Kennedy* (München: Heyne, 1965).

⁵ Cf. Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, „The Writing of World History in Europe from the Middle of the Nineteenth Century to the Present: Conceptual Renewal and Challenge to National Histories,“ in *Transnational Challenges to National History Writing*, ed. Matthias Middell and Lluís Roura (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 54 f.

This may be surprising, given the long tradition of interest in world history – or universal history, terms that are often used synonymously – among German scholars. At the time of Friedrich Schiller and his famous inaugural lecture “What Is and to What End Do We Study Universal History,”⁶ universal history was treated as pansophy, as an *Überdisziplin* bringing all other fields of study together to map the historical progress of humankind and dedicated to the improvement of the human condition.⁷ In late nineteenth century, the interest of most historians shifted towards detailed study of relatively small patches of time and space, the universality of world history suddenly seeming superficial and obsolete. At the same time, German historiography took on the self-imposed task of providing historical basis to claims about the uniqueness and independent identity of the emerging German nation, something that ran contrary to the very core of the study of humankind as one undivided entity.⁸ Universal history retreated into the position of a non-essential extravagance: Leopold von Ranke, the giant of nineteenth-century German historiography, after a lifetime of dealing almost exclusively with history within nation-state boundaries, allowed himself not only the quip “at the end of the day, it is not possible to write anything but universal history,”⁹ but also – in his eighties – a nine-volume *Alterswerk* on world history.¹⁰ Karl Lamprecht who devoted his entire career to universal history never overcame his reputation as something of an outsider.¹¹

At the turn of the century, world history experienced an unprecedented boom, stemming both from the experience of growing global interdependence and from the colonial expansion of European nations, in which Germany played a small but ambitious role.¹² This approach, although inherently Eurocentric, nevertheless brought with it a new focus on non-European regions. These tendencies found expression in the founding of the Institute of Cultural and Universal History at the university of Leipzig in 1909. The feeling of global cohesion and the advent of international institutions between the wars continued to fan the flame of world history research, although the mainstream opinion of the profession still

⁶ Friedrich Schiller, *Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte? Eine akademische Antrittsrede bey Eröffnung seiner Vorlesungen gehalten* (Jena: Akademische Buchhandlung, 1790).

⁷ Hanna Schissler, „Weltgeschichte als Geschichte der sich globalisierenden Welt,“ *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 1-2 (2005), <http://www.bpb.de/apuz/29307/weltgeschichte-als-geschichte-der-sich-globalisierenden-welt>. Accessed 22.1.2017.

⁸ Michael Maurer, ed. *Aufriß der historischen Wissenschaften. Band 2: Räume* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001), 18.

⁹ „Überhaupt befestigt sich in mir immer mehr die Meinung, dass zuletzt doch nichts weiter geschrieben werden kann, als die Universalgeschichte.“ Leopold von Ranke, *Sämmtliche Werke* 53 (Leipzig: 1890), 270.

¹⁰ Leopold von Ranke, *Weltgeschichte*, 9 volumes (Leipzig: 1881–1888).

¹¹ Maurer, *Aufriß*, 19.

¹² Cf. Hartmut Bergenthum, *Weltgeschichten im Zeitalter der Weltpolitik. Zur populären Geschichtsschreibung im wilhelminischen Deutschland* (München: M-Press, 2004); Jürgen Osterhammel, „Raumerfassung und Universalgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert,“ in *Universalgeschichte und Nationalgeschichten. Ernst Schulin zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Gangolf Hübinger, Erich Pelzer, and Jürgen Osterhammel (Freiburg: Rombach, 1994), 51-72.

maintained that it is not historians' mission to follow the *Zeitgeist* and that they should concern themselves with matters of the past and not with those of the present.¹³

The time after the Second World War was in no way favorable to world history pursuits. The only universal history institute in Leipzig ended up in East Germany and although the perpetuation of Marxist tradition of universal history could have proven an interesting way of approaching the field, its research did not escape the ideological distortion into a few schematic theses about phenomena such as feudalism and about the supposedly predestined ways of historical development. Meanwhile, West German academia returned once again to a focus on German national history and to a deep distrust of grand narratives. The concept of the first, second, and third worlds did not help either: when every piece of the planet was safely stowed in its own shelf, there remained little space for a discipline that sought to bring them all together. The 1970s and 1980s when the present structure of German academic institutions had largely been formed and when most of today's professors and department chairs received their education were a time marked by the lowest ebb of interest in world history.¹⁴ Although recent years have witnessed a renewed surge of engagement with the discipline, fuelled in part by the U.S. import of global history,¹⁵ academic institutions have not yet followed suit and reacted to the new situation. There continues to be, in the whole of Germany, only one institution explicitly and exclusively devoted to the study of world history: the Global and European Studies Institute in Leipzig, successor of Lamprecht's Institute of Cultural and Universal History. In a way, the institutional situation of world history in Germany is the same as one hundred years ago.

This sounds bleak indeed – but when one turns away from the institutional structures and looks at the actual research being done in world history in Germany, things begin to look very different. Indeed, regarding the number – and quality – of publications, journals, and networks in the field, one cannot but agree with Peer Vries, a prominent world historian from Vienna, who wrote in 2009: “Global history, or world history [...] is in very good shape at the moment. [...] [It] is very much alive and has evolved into a mature discipline.”¹⁶

¹³ Matthias Middell, *Weltgeschichtsschreibung im Zeitalter der Verfachlichung und Professionalisierung. Das Leipziger Institut für Kultur- und Universalgeschichte 1890 – 1990. Band 1: Das Institut unter der Leitung Karl Lamprechts* (Leipzig: Akad. Verl.-Anst., 2005), 61.

¹⁴ Osterhammel, „Global History,“ 47.

¹⁵ Susanne Popp, „Weltgeschichte,“ in *Wörterbuch Geschichtsdidaktik*, ed. Ulrich Mayer (Schwalbach: Wochenschau-Verlag, 2014), 196.

¹⁶ Peer Vries, Editorial to *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 20,2 (2009), Special Issue on Global History.

Let us, for the sake of mapping the current state of world, or global, history in Germany, imagine a budding young student of history, with an ardent interest in the subject but with only a vague notion of which of its many subdisciplines to choose. Somewhere along the way, she (for purely statistical reasons, let us imagine our protagonist to be a woman) comes across world history. If she decides to pursue this line of historical study, what are the options open to her in German academia?

Our fictional young scholar will first of all want to know what world history is and what it does. To do that, she can choose from a broad array of general overviews, many of them written by renowned scholars in the field and published within the last ten years. Some of them focus on the historiography of world and global history, surveying the current state of the art and the possibilities and limitations of the discipline; others deal with its methods and theories; yet others are “genuine” world histories, seeking to retrace some of the phenomena that have tied the world together in the past centuries.¹⁷ Our student of world history thus can not only get an idea about what world history research looks like, but also what the methodological and theoretical approaches of the field are.

Persuaded about the merit of world history, she now looks for a suitable program at some of Germany’s most prestigious universities. At most of them, unfortunately, she will look in vain: except for Leipzig, very few universities offer a Master’s program in global or world history. Most history departments, though, although not specializing in the discipline, do offer courses on world history: global history of the twentieth century, history of human rights, internationalism and the League of Nations, history of violence.¹⁸ Even though courses on national, or at the most, regional histories, continue to be prevalent, this is still a major change, compared to the situation in late twentieth century: as Jürgen Osterhammel pointed out, prior to the current generation of Ph.D. students, “nobody in Germany ever had a chance of being *trained* from the outset in the study of global phenomena.”¹⁹ The situation is slowly changing, with general history departments offering more courses on issues transcending the nation-state boundaries; nevertheless, in teaching global history in Germany, there is still a long way to go.

¹⁷ Cf. Sebastian Conrad, *Globalgeschichte. Eine Einführung* (München: Beck, 2013); Akira Iriye and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds., *Geschichte der Welt*. 4 volumes (München: Beck, since 2012); Andrea Komlosy, *Globalgeschichte. Methoden und Theorien* (Wien: Böhlau, 2011); Sebastian Conrad, Andreas Eckert, and Ulrike Freitag, eds., *Globalgeschichte. Theorien, Ansätze, Themen* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2007).

¹⁸ These courses were offered at the history department of the university of Munich in the winter term 2016.

¹⁹ Osterhammel, „Global History,” 44.

After receiving her training, our young historian might start to seek contact to like-minded scholars in her field. Luckily for her, she will find a number of well-organised networks, hiding under mysterious-sounding abbreviations such as ENIUGH or NOGWHISTO. ENIUGH, the European Network in Universal and Global History, was founded in 2002 as an internationally-minded successor of the *Karl-Lamprecht-Gesellschaft*, a German learned society devoted to the study and promotion of comparative historical perspectives. Based in Leipzig, the ENIUGH organizes a triennial congress devoted to “global and transnational history and adjacent disciplines”²⁰ and is in the process of becoming a world-wide organization. NOGWHISTO, the Network of Global and World History Organisations, although being essentially global in scope and membership, is also headquartered in Leipzig and organizes a conference every five years in cooperation with the CISH (Comité International des Sciences Historiques), in addition to smaller network meetings. For the German-speaking scholars, there is also the *Verein für Geschichte des Weltsystems*, founded in 1992 and devoted to the study of the world system theory.

If the young scholar decides to publish her research and if she decides to do so in German – a rather unusual decision for world and global historians who more often than not seek to publish the outcomes of their research in international journals and in English – she has a number of options open to her. There is the *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte* (Journal of World History), published since 2000 by the *Verein für Geschichte des Weltsystems*; there is *Saeculum. Jahrbuch für Universalgeschichte* (Yearbook of Universal History), in existence since 1950 and focusing on comparative and universal history perspective; and there is *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* (Journal of Global History and Comparative Studies), with a publication history that goes back to 1991 and with a strong international spin – to name just the most prominent academic journals. All three are renowned publications with regular contributions from international scholars.

Now a published author, well-connected in her field, our protagonist might start looking for a university position as world historian. At this point at the latest, she will be confronted with the fact that German world history largely depends on individual people with an interest in the field, not university structures. There are very few centers of world history research in Germany, Berlin, Hamburg, Heidelberg, and of course Leipzig being among the few exceptions. Most of the eminent world history scholars do not hold positions in world

²⁰ Fifth European Congress on World and Global History. <http://research.uni-leipzig.de/~eniugh/congress/previous-congresses/>. Accessed 22.1.2017.

history (the rare exceptions being Matthias Middell who holds a professorship in global history in Leipzig, and Sebastian Conrad, a global history professor in Berlin): Andreas Eckert is professor for African history, Ulrike Freitag holds a position in Islamic studies, and Jürgen Osterhammel, one of Germany's most prolific world historians, is a professor of modern history at the university of Konstanz. If our protagonist is hired by a history department, her job description probably will not say "world history". This, however, will not prevent her from pursuing research in that field – only she will perhaps do so under the auspices of modern, economic, or science history. Her prospects are as precarious as any other young historian's; but they are by no means dire.

A scholar who decides to direct his or her attention toward world history research in Germany is entering an extremely lively and diverse academic landscape. Building on several past waves of interest in the subject and drawing on international inspirations, German world history has evolved during the last two decades into an active and mature field of historical study. It went a long way since the Braunschweig gathering in 2002. Publication possibilities, wide-ranging networks, and exciting new research being done in the field provide for a vivid and inspiring atmosphere that invites interest and new contributions. This still relatively new development has not yet quite trickled down to the level of academic structures, so that it is left to the scholars themselves to, so to say, fill the old institutional bottles with new wine of world history content. So far, they are doing an excellent job.