

IN THIS ISSUE

For many, it came as a surprise that colonial history has recently become highly politicised again – and has thus also acquired renewed relevance for contemporary history. It was long assumed that German colonial history had been a relatively brief episode mainly in the late 19th century and ending with the First World War, with no particular implications for the recent past and the incipient 21st century. But various factors have put the history of colonialism and imperialism and its cross-epochal consequences back on the public and academic agenda. This applies to classic colonial powers like France, but also, somewhat differently, to Germany. The debate about ›Nazi-looted art‹ and its possible restitution has been an ongoing issue in international relations and in (art-)historical research since the ›Washington Declaration‹ of 1998; this has meanwhile had still further repercussions and has effectively extended the critical interrogation of the connections between political power and cultural heritage further back into the past. The ›Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace‹ is in many ways paradigmatic of the conflicts and research desiderata emanating from this.

Our cover picture shows a 15-metre-long sailing boat from the Pacific island of Luf, which was part of the ›protectorate‹ of German New Guinea during the German Empire. The boat was purchased by the ›Museum für Völkerkunde‹ (museum of ethnology) in Berlin in 1903. It was displayed as part of the permanent exhibition of the ›Ethnological Museum‹ in Berlin-Dahlem from the 1960s onwards, until preparations began for its relocation to the ›Humboldt Forum‹ (as seen in the photo from December 2017). At considerable effort and cost, the boat reached its designated exhibition venue as the first large-scale object in May 2018. The walls of the future foyer could only be constructed once the boat had arrived.¹ Although this South Pacific boat is arguably one of the less problematic objects – it was not ›looted‹, but rather was no longer required by its indigenous builders and sold initially to a German trading company – the picture is nevertheless symbolic here of an analytical, sometimes investigative and probing perspective on exhibits from colonial contexts, for a kind of laboratory situation for museum work. The challenge for the ›Humboldt Forum‹ and other museums is to make the processes of preservation and documentation transparent while also preserving the physical integrity of the objects in line with modern conservation standards. But the question of where this is useful and legitimate is often contentious, as demonstrated in particular by the current debate surrounding France's museums.

The discussion section of the present issue, organised by *Daniel Morat* and *Irmgard Zündorf*, draws on high-profile examples from Poland, Austria, the US and Germany to examine the relationship between history and politics *in* museums and also, explicitly, the politics of the past *with* museums. Even though the major museums of

1 <<https://humboldtforum.com/de/stories/suedseeboot-schwebt-ins-humboldt-forum>>; <<https://humboldtforum.com/de/stories/12-stunden>>. The different museum names are markers, contingent on the circumstances of the time in question, of access to the content and objects.

national importance are inevitably embedded in political contexts and have to adopt a position in relation to these – which in some countries means a battle for their institutional existence – it is clear that serious museum work should not be based primarily on political agendas, but on sound research and information. The Volkswagen Foundation has recently reiterated this for Germany in a review of its funding initiative ›Research in Museums‹.² It would be misleading to assume that such research – particularly the study of object biographies – had to start from scratch. Many museums can draw on broad experience and documentation, but have long not received the funding required for this work that goes on in the background.³ Certain current attempts to subordinate this ongoing and often difficult research work to the temporalities and decision-making pressures of the political system should therefore be viewed critically – as important as a decisive political push like that by the French president can indeed be.⁴ Another peril of the German debate in particular is the ›strange rivalry of unjust German regimes‹.⁵ The engagement with colonial history, the purported ›return of the repressed, if you will,‹⁶ is sometimes squeezed into the version of memorial politics that has established itself in this country as the proper way to ›come to terms‹ with the crimes of National Socialism. A nuanced consideration of colonial power structures is essential, but should not be too hasty to adopt such topoi.

The relationship between history, historical scholarship and politics was also at the heart of the debate surrounding a resolution that was adopted by the German Association of Historians in September 2018 at the 52nd German Historians' Convention in Münster, but which caused controversy both at the convention itself as well as in the press coverage that followed. *Krijn Thijs* identifies some of the key tendencies of this debate in an essay for this issue. The fundamental questions here about the public and, implicitly or explicitly, also political role of contemporary historians have not yet been satisfactorily answered (and can perhaps never be answered definitively). A position articulated by Lutz Raphael two months prior to the convention is still worthy of consideration: ›Simply delivering evidence of the authenticity of experiences of oppression and violence from a democratic perspective which highlights power asymmetries is no longer enough when it comes to doing the work of political education as a historian today. Figures of thought that were once subversive have long since become a feature of arguments around the politics of the past that are used to justify current claims to status and positions of power. I believe that political and intellectual commitment must also involve demonstrating one's own independence and discernment

2 Press release from 19 March 2019: <<https://idw-online.de/de/news712330>>.

3 This is emphasised by the former director (2001–2017) of the Ethnological Museum of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Berlin State Museums): Viola König, Die Ethnologen sind keine Täter, in: *Welt*, 22 August 2017.

4 Cf. Patrick Bahners, Französisches Ausleerungsgeschäft. Der »Bericht über die Restitution afrikanischen Kulturerbes«, in: *Merkur* 73 (2019) issue 3, pp. 5-17.

5 Jörg Häntzschel, Konkurrenz des Unrechts, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 15 March 2019.

6 Bénédicte Savoy, Die verdrängte Debatte, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4 March 2019.

vis-à-vis the need for group identities. But this requires us to be prepared to defend the opportunities of our academic autonomy in order that we can actually intervene effectively in the political debates when necessary.⁷ While historians were arguing (and will hopefully continue to argue) about when and how declarations of political principles may be helpful, an eminent sociologist noted that his discipline was increasingly preoccupied only with itself and was now largely ignored by the general public. Historians, he said, were better at making their voices heard outside of their own subject area as well.⁸

In addition to debates like these on matters that are of great concern today, this issue of course also presents a range of current research findings in contemporary history whose relevance stems to a greater extent from contexts within the field. In an article investigating housing and property in East Germany, *Kerstin Brückweh* contributes to the history of transformation before and after 1989/90; she combines this with a special interest in the social science research material from this period of upheaval. *Florian Greiner* and *Maren Röger* consider the presence of the Cold War in everyday life through an analysis of board and computer games from East and West. In a case study on visual history, *Dennis Jelonnek* shows how black employees of the American film and camera manufacturer Polaroid protested against their employer doing business with the apartheid regime in South Africa and against surveillance techniques used there.

In the ›Sources‹ section, *Hans-Ulrich Wagner* reviews the radio appearances by Hessian Chief Public Prosecutor Fritz Bauer, who utilised the medium in the 1960s to raise historical and political awareness and benefited from its special vocal presence. This article ties in with our earlier spotlights on sound history⁹ while also anticipating the forthcoming special issue on ›Contemporary History of Law‹ (ZF 2/2019). *Daniel Burckhardt*, *Alexander Geyken*, *Achim Saupe* and *Thomas Werneke* present the possibilities of computer-assisted ›distant reading‹ for evaluations of the GDR press; their methodology is also transferable to other subject areas and bodies of texts. Encouragingly, studies on digital history now go beyond mere calls for action and are leading to practical applications with concrete results. Finally, in the ›Literature Revisited‹ section *Yves Müller* recalls Lutz Niethammer's study on the NPD (›Adapted Fascism‹) – a book that was published 50 years ago as a political intervention and can provide important inspiration for studies on the history of the radical right today.

Just as we were proofreading the final galleys for this issue, we received news of the death of Jürgen Zarusky (1958–2019), longstanding editor and, since 2016, editor-in-chief of the journal *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*. Despite some differences in

7 Lutz Raphael, *Auszug aus der Komfortzone?*, 10 July 2018, URL: <<https://blog.historikerverband.de/2018/07/10/auszug-aus-der-komfortzone/>>.

8 Armin Nassehi, *Seid wieder Spielverderber!*, in: *ZEIT*, 10 January 2019. As previously similarly suggested with respect to political science, Frank Decker/Eckhard Jesse, *Fach ohne Ausstrahlung*, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20 April 2016. Neither article has gone uncontested, of course.

9 Cf. <<https://zeithistorische-forschungen.de/thematische-klassifikation/sound-history>>.

perspective, topics and format between the *Vierteljahrshefte* and the *Studies in Contemporary History*, we share certain fundamental convictions: the belief that journals for the communication of historical scholarship are indispensable, and the endeavour to make good texts even better through the editorial process. Jürgen Zarusky's extensive expertise, his editorial vigilance, and his empathy and insightfulness will be missed – especially when discussing many shared questions about the past and the present day.

Jan-Holger Kirsch for the editorial team
(Translated from the German by Joy Titheridge)