

THE 50TH ISSUE

At first glance, the seventeenth year of this journal's publication would not appear to mark any particular anniversary. And yet the present edition is quite special for the editors and the editorial team: it is the 50th issue overall. (There was a double issue in 2007, otherwise there have always been three issues each year.) This milestone is the occasion for a brief review of the original objectives and of developments thus far, as well as a (self-)critical look at what the future may bring. Scholars in the nascent field of the cultural study of periodicals have rightly observed: 'The production of periodicals is often accompanied by reflections on the value, conditions, and promise of producing periodicals.'¹

1. Looking back

Founding a new journal in 2003/04 was a risky venture. Martin Sabrow had already floated the idea some ten years earlier, but at that time Jürgen Kocka, then director of the Contemporary History Research Group in Potsdam, considered the project too costly in view of the institute's limited funds and uncertain future. A successful application for a DFG (German Research Foundation) grant, authored largely by Jürgen Danyel, enabled the Centre for Contemporary History (ZZF) to make another attempt. (The website *zeitgeschichte / online* also emerged from this same proposal.) *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* (the question of the title would be a story in its own right) was never meant to be purely for internal consumption at the ZZF, but to contribute to the continuation and consolidation of the institution. Above all, it was to give voice to the younger generation of scholars whose questions and research interests were not sufficiently reflected in other journals. What were the objectives in terms of content, and to what extent have these been achieved?

The first editorial was written by Konrad H. Jarausch and Christoph Kleßmann and set out the new journal's *raison d'être* as a response to fundamental changes in contemporary historical interests. After the peaceful revolution of 1989, there were now two dictatorial German pasts demanding research and a social reckoning. The era of the Cold War and the partition of Germany was added to the established history of the world wars and the Holocaust. After 1989/90, the inexorable transformation of the present into history and the transformation of previous sociocultural and political structures also called for new historical explanations. Moreover, Europeanisation and

¹ Moritz Neuffer, editorial on the featured topic: Beiträge zur kulturwissenschaftlichen Zeitschriftenforschung, in: *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 45 (2020), pp. 103-111, here p. 105.

globalisation were already extending beyond the national frame of reference. These diverse subject areas were united by an understanding of contemporary history as »scholarly enlightenment (*Zeitgeschichte als wissenschaftliche Aufklärung*) – a term that, following Christoph Kleßmann, implied (and implies) politically sensitive citizenship as well as the observance and raising of professional historiographical standards.

At the same time, the ubiquitous mediatisation of the past and the increasing digitalisation of communication among scholars necessitated new forms of academic publishing and the evolution of standards for this field. After intensive debate, we opted for a hybrid model with a print edition that would meet the established standards for academic journals and an online publication that would try out and methodologically reflect the new possibilities for dealing with visual material, video clips and recordings. Rigorous assessment (peer review) was to ensure a high standard of research while also responding to the enormous presence of (contemporary) history in the media. The realisation of these goals was not easy. Photographic material from the recent past is generally subject to licence fees (which are sometimes prohibitively high for dual use in print and online), while the free online availability of the journal considerably reduced the number of subscriptions that the publisher Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht was able to achieve. It is no small matter that the publisher agreed to this experiment and has continued to support it to this day.

Whether this dual publication model has proven a success in terms of scholarship, and will continue to do so, is best left to the judgement of our readers. Whatever the case, the online edition received more than 360,000 page views in 2020. The archive of past journal issues, which has expanded over the years and is easily searchable by subject area, has contributed in large part to this. Individual articles and entire special issues have often been picked up by journalists – even as it has become harder to find an audience and get airtime on the radio and space in print. The decision to produce special issues (generally two of the three issues brought out each year) made it possible to focus on specific topics, sometimes with an interdisciplinary approach.

Already during the very first year, researchers of international renown like Mary Fulbrook, Michael Geyer, Henry Rousso, Karl Schlögel and Michael Wildt were involved – sending an important signal as regards acceptance of the journal and the standards it upholds. At the same time, *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* has a strong track record of attracting young authors with original, empirically grounded articles and providing them with a forum in its pages. Sections such as the re-reading of classics of contemporary history (»Literature Revisited) quickly became popular in research and teaching, while the occasional reviews of contemporary history exhibitions, films and television series also reached a wide audience. All told, *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* soon found its own niche, particularly with the younger generation of scholars, who appreciated the accessible style, the combination of the proven and the experimental, along with the free and easy online access.

That the new journal, which we began with a necessary mixture of courage and naiveté, succeeded in becoming established, is also due to its organisational model. For one thing, the international academic advisory board helped to select topics that have shaped the journal's profile and to review (sometimes) controversial manuscripts. For another, the networks of the largely Berlin-Brandenburg based editorial team of younger scholars (two of whom have since joined the advisory board) ensured a wide range of new questions and provided many contacts to potential authors. It should also be noted that much of the required communication and the work of reading the manuscripts is done on a voluntary basis. Above all, however, the Centre for Contemporary History, which has been a member of the Leibniz Association since 2009, proved to be a firm institutional anchor following the initial funding of the journal by the DFG. This benefits *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* in many respects, just as it in turn enhances the institute's reputation, as evidenced by the positive 2012 and 2019 evaluations of the ZZF.

2. Looking forward

In spite of this generally encouraging trend, there are still areas for improvement – and lots of ideas for new directions. In terms of the vast majority of the texts, *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* is a German-language journal. This limits its impact among scholars; to raise the international profile of the journal, the proportion of English-language articles and translations needs to be higher than it has been (thus also entailing greater costs). Yet German remains indispensable as a language of scholarship in Germany if one wants to have an impact on journalism and members of the public with an interest in history.

Another challenge is the continuing hesitation of text-based historical scholarship to explore the sounds and images of the past, due partly to practical hurdles, partly to a lack of interest. As a result, these efforts have still not become as integral a part of standard practice as may be desired. Researching and acquiring audiovisual material – which ideally does not merely serve an illustrative function but is used as a source with an epistemic value of its own – is time-consuming and costly. It is therefore no coincidence that few other historical journals have adopted our approach.

There is also a constant pressure for innovation when it comes to finding an attractive form of online presentation that is aligned with changing media use habits while also presenting original subject matter. Seventeen years are a long time in online media, with technology and graphics undergoing enormous changes. *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* and the ZZF have only limited ability to keep up with these dynamics, but still aspire to be curious and open to experimenting with new ideas regarding content and design. Authors are warmly invited to develop

contributions in consultation with the editorial team that depart from the conventional formats. Nonetheless, purely text-based research findings and ideas for discussion will continue to be equally valid.

A new addition in recent years is the platform *Zeitgeschichte digital*, an integrated search interface for all of the digital content under the editorial stewardship of the ZZF. This increases the practical use of the web archive: Although contributions to *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, to *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte* and *Visual History*, and to *zeitgeschichte / online* have their own formats and emerged in different contexts, *Zeitgeschichte digital* now makes it much easier for anyone searching for particular topics for research and teaching to find what they're looking for. The detailed indexing, which allows even older articles to acquire fresh contexts and thematic relationships, is a particularly valuable aspect of the virtual archive. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts and steadily continues to grow.

There is, finally, the broader question of the role that academic journals can and should play in the future as a form of communication in historical scholarship and contemporary history in particular. Various other media such as blogs and microblogs (yes, even Twitter!) are now much better suited for real-time interventions. Many authors prefer to disseminate their texts or drafts there so as to >go live< quickly and without time-consuming peer reviews or intermediaries. But in terms of long-term accessibility, professional validation and source-based argumentation, journals still have a key role to play. They provide content that might be described as of a second level of immediacy – with just enough distance from the news of the day to afford a clear perspective on contemporary developments. However, there is a certain risk of hyperspecialisation in ever narrower subdisciplines and niches. *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* counters this trend with a strong commitment to a >general< contemporary history that seeks to bring together the various strands of research and geographical foci as well as different preferences in terms of methodology and content. It is our hope that every issue of the journal will convince our readers and authors of the merits of this form of communication.

Finally, we would also like to thank all those who have been unstinting in their support both on- and offline on the long road to this 50th issue. The common framework for ongoing discussion has been tremendously rewarding for the editorial team, editors and advisory board. We have learned much through our work on *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* – about the quality of manuscripts and the relevance of different topics, about contemporary and public history, about things past and present – especially when we entered contentious terrain. Journals are not only embedded in scholarship, culture and society, but also form social networks of their own. We look forward to whatever new developments the coming years may bring. There will certainly be no shortage of ideas, debates and research problems for contemporary history to address.

Konrad H. Jarausch/Jan-Holger Kirsch
(Translated from the German by Joy Titheridge)