



**German
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**INTERVIEW WITH
LOTHAR KETTENACKER AND PETER ALTER,
FORMER DEPUTY DIRECTORS OF THE
GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON**

Professor Andreas Gestrich (G): Gentlemen, thank you for your willingness to tell us about the beginnings of the German Historical Institute London from your point of view as former Deputy Directors. There was a long run-up to the official opening of the GHIL on 4 November 1976. Lothar Kettenacker, what can you tell us about this?

Professor Lothar Kettenacker (K): The idea of establishing a German Historical Institute goes back to Carl Haase, then Director of the State Archives of Lower Saxony. His initiative resulted first in the founding of the Association of British and German Historians (Britisch-Deutscher Historikerkreis, BDHK) which, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, organized conferences and granted scholarships for Ph.D. students as well as one for a post-doc, who turned out to be me. My project was to study the British government's wartime planning for post-Second World War Germany. In January 1972 the BDHK set up a small office in Chancery Lane, close to the Public Record Office, which was also in Chancery Lane at that time. That was the nucleus of what later became the GHIL. The first Research Fellow apart from me was Wilhelm Lenz from the Hanover State Archives, who was compiling sources on Anglo-German history in British archives since 1500.

G: And what preparations did you make for establishing an institute in London?

K: Essentially, our preparations consisted of organizing conferences and finding suitable accommodation. Once the German Federal Budget of 1975 provided funds for the BDHK as the association sponsoring the new Institute, the office moved into two floors of 26 Blooms-

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bury Square. No doubt, Bloomsbury Square was the best possible location for such an institute, but from the point of view of space, this modest accommodation could not provide an adequate home for the Institute in the long run.

G: The establishment of the Institute in London had been preceded by the founding of German Historical Institutes in Paris and Rome, which could have served as models. But in London things took a different course. The legal structure and the research focus of the London Institute differed clearly from those in the Paris and Rome Institutes.

K: This was mainly due to the Verein which had been formed, a body consisting of German and British historians and archivists, and a British librarian as well. As the official recipient of funds from the West German Federal Ministry of Research, the Verein ran the Institute. In other words, it supplied the Institute's constitutional framework from the start. But this also suited the Ministry of Research, which at that time did not wish to create additional civil service positions (like those in the other institutes). What the Ministry had in mind was the legal constitution of an association, along the lines of the Max Planck Society.

G: Did the fact that the Institute was not a department of the West German Federal Government but a private foundation funded by the government make it easier for British historians to get involved?

K: Yes, you can certainly say that. Even if some British historians were not fully aware of all the subtleties of the Institute's governance, they knew that politically and academically it was completely independent. That stood the Institute in good stead in terms of its reception in the host country, especially at the beginning.

G: Peter Alter, you arrived at the newly founded Institute in 1976. In the meantime, Britain had joined the EEC. As you saw it, what expectations did British academics have of the Institute?

Professor Peter Alter (A): For British expectations and the role of the Institute in the 1970s we must first look at the general situation. The

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Institute opened soon after the oil crisis. The years 1976 to 1978 were hard ones in Britain; we just have to think back to the 'winter of discontent'. Inflation was rampant and things were pretty chaotic. I remember that during the winter months we sat in our offices with candles on our desks because the electricity kept going off. Outside, the pavements were covered in garbage bags—it was an extremely difficult situation. For the Research Fellows who came over at that time, Britain was still very foreign. Some had trouble getting used to conditions here.

For our English colleagues, everyday life was not easy either in those years. Nonetheless, many took a genuine interest in the new Institute. A number of well-known historians quickly established contact with us: James Joll, Geoffrey Dickens, Richard Evans, John Röhl, Paul Kennedy, and Volker Berghahn were among them, as were Tony Nicholls, David Blackbourn, Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, Ian Kershaw, and William Carr. I should also like to mention the German immigrants of the 1930s who taught and researched history here, such as, for example, Francis Carsten, Charlotte Jolles, and Arnold Paucker. They approached the Institute immediately, and encouraged us in many respects. They also made sure that the Research Fellows were integrated into the local academic community.

G: Can you give some specific examples of this?

A: About every four weeks, the Carstens gave a dinner, when they had visitors from abroad. When they were expecting guests, they always invited members of the Institute too. That went on until Francis's wife, Ruth, died in the early 1990s. Arnold and Pauline Paucker, too, with their many interests, always tried to bring people into contact with each other. And Charlotte Jolles took a very great interest in modern German history. She, too, was very hospitable. Sometimes three or four of us visited her, she would prepare some dinner, and we would talk about all sorts of things. That was very helpful in this early phase of the Institute's existence, especially for the young Research Fellows who came over here.

G: Norbert Elias was a regular guest at the Carstens' home, as they were close friends. Do you remember their meetings?

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A: No, I never met Norbert Elias. I only knew that he and Francis Carsten had been friends before their emigration. Curiously, many emigrants who were or became historians, later lived in Hampstead. Nicolai Rubinstein and Francis Carsten were neighbours; they had gone to the same secondary school in Berlin, and then they met again in London.

G: In the early years of its existence, the Institute moved several times, until in 1982 it was able to move into its current building at 17 Bloomsbury Square. How important for the Institute and its staff was this central location, lying between University College London, Birkbeck, the LSE, King's College London, and the British Library?

A: No other location was possible for the Institute; it had to be in this area of the capital. No other area was ever discussed, as far as I remember. When the staff saw this building for the first time, we were very impressed by its size. The official opening was held in 1982, in the presence of the Duke of Gloucester, a cousin of the Queen. Half an hour before the beginning of the event, he drove up on a motorcycle, dressed in full leathers, and got changed in an office. We liked his nonchalance very much.

K: This area was chosen for two reasons. First, the aim was to have enough space for the Institute in the long term. The Library, in particular, was growing and needed more room. Secondly, we wanted to attract students and lecturers, and so only this central location came into question. Geoffrey Dickens, Foreign Secretary of the British Academy and one of the Institute's most influential founding fathers, repeatedly pointed this out.

G: The GHIL Library, with German history as the focus of its collection, provides a service for British historians of Germany. Lothar Kettenacker, how was this decision made?

K: We German historians at the Institute were primarily interested in researching the history of the British Isles. But in the long term, the Institute could only succeed if it also catered for the interests of the British academic community. At that time, European history was becoming popular at British universities, and a library of German

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history was a great attraction, especially as the British Library could no longer afford to buy German historical literature comprehensively, as it had done before 1914. If we had not provided this service, the Institute would have remained an ivory tower of German research for ever.

A: We must, of course, also take into account that even then, in the 1970s, there were more British historians interested in German history than German historians interested in British history. It therefore made sense to establish an Institute in London. The concentration of universities in London, Oxford, Cambridge etc. plus the existence of research institutes was unique. The service offered by the Institute included hosting conferences at which German and British historians could meet more often. Many knew of each other only through publications; now they could see each other in person at a conference or lecture organized by the Institute.

G: Your time as deputy directors also covers the Institute's transition to a new legal structure. Initially, the German Historical Institutes in Washington and Warsaw joined the Verein which ran the London Institute. Finally, in 2002, all the German Historical Institutes were transferred to the care of a new Foundation, German Humanities Institutes Abroad (Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland), now the Max Weber Foundation. What impact did this have on the Institute?

K: All this happened in the background, out of necessity, because in many respects, especially as far as the administration was concerned, the Verein proved to be unequal to the new challenges of running the institute. The transition began in London, where the inadequacies of the old legal structure were all too obvious, but had a greater effect on the institutes in Paris and Rome, which had been much more closely tied to the Ministry. For us in London, the Foundation merely meant a consolidation of legal and administrative structures. The change was not based on larger academic considerations.

G: The GHIL was founded at a time when Britain had just joined the EEC. It was very clearly a West German establishment. Did the work of the Institute change from 1989 as a result of reunification?

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K: I don't think that British historians ever perceived the Institute as a West German institution in the narrow sense. Their interest in Imperial Germany, the Weimar Republic, and the Third Reich related to the whole of Germany. In Britain, however, German reunification brought a short-lived increase in interest in the German nation-state based on latent anxieties relating to the question: has the wretched Bismarck empire reawakened? The British media, of course, approached us frequently at this time, but more important than what we could say were the views of British historians—I am thinking especially of Paul Kennedy—who could reassure the British public that they had nothing to fear from this reunified Germany.

A: Personally—I worked at the Institute until 1994—I did not see reunification as a dramatic turning point. What changed was that while we had many visitors, we suddenly also received visits from students and historians from the former GDR. But this was not perceived as anything sensational. They were just visitors, like those from the USA or Canada. There was a generous programme of scholarships, which gave us contact with young historians from the former GDR. This was nothing dramatic, but it was a new experience for us.

G: If you look back over the history of the GHIL, Peter Alter, what do you see as its greatest achievements as a mediator between German and British historiography?

A: Well, I am not a judge. As a participant observer, I would say that the Institute's main function was and is to provide a meeting place. It has always been highly successful in doing this in various ways: through lectures and conferences, or simply by giving people the chance to run into colleagues and students in the Common Room or the Library. Research Fellows often taught at universities in and around London, fostering the interest of British students in German history. I think that is very important. I have some doubts about the GHIL's publications because I have a feeling that academic publications, in general, address a very small audience. And German-language books on British history are not much noticed by Anglophone historians. In the early years of the Institute, cooperation with German emigrants was very important. We early had a close rela-

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tionship with the Leo Baeck Institute and the Wiener Library, whose users then also sought out the Institute. I found this chance for reconciliation extremely satisfying in the Institute's early days. I think the Institute was very successful in this area.

G: Lothar Kettenacker, how would you like to see the Institute develop in future?

K: From the start, the Institute fostered bilateral exchange. Wolfgang Mommsen as Director had already wanted to liberate himself from this approach in the concepts of the conferences he organized, and to a large extent he succeeded. In my opinion, in the long term, this bilateral axis will no longer be enough to justify the Institute's existence. The Institute must go beyond this phase of reconciliation, something that can now be taken for granted. After the surprising result of the recent referendum, it is certainly appropriate for the Institute to continue promoting awareness of the significance of Europe. It is really about seeing Europe as a whole. In academic terms, this can be achieved by contributing to comparative political or social and cultural history. The Institute should perhaps do more to ensure that the awareness of Europe that is certainly present in the younger generation reaches the media and the public. The debate about Brexit has shown how much influence the popular press in particular has in this country (as it did, incidentally, before 1914). This has to be countered. How, in what way, I cannot say; that will require detailed consideration, also in view of the oppressive aspects of a modern media democracy. This is where I see the Institute's future tasks.

A: I would start with a historical argument. In the nineteenth century, basically until 1914, Germany was considered to be the country of science and scholarship. The fact that Britain today again sees Germany as a country of science and learning, including historiography, is certainly among the Institute's achievements. I find it difficult, however, to say how this should be developed in future. Although they will always be a core component of the Institute's work, bilateral relations can no longer be pursued as closely as before—here I definitely agree with Lothar Kettenacker. The much vaunted comparative perspective should, really, drive all historical work, and this is

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already happening. What 'European' means is difficult to define. What is European historiography? How can one be a European historian? One always starts out from one's own perspective, including the national. To expand this is difficult, although one should always try.

K: The European Union should not be reduced to the increasingly disputed model of the USA. Europe should be perceived as an area of historical experience which, in the long term, will lead to a common understanding. This need not be based on a theoretical construct of Europe, but can simply draw on the investigation of various phenomena, such as, for example, industrialization. Mommsen had already attempted to demonstrate this by a comparative study of the welfare state. Another example could be the relationship between state and church in various countries, and now the problem of Muslims from different countries in Britain, France, and Germany. We should help to establish something like a European public by developing a European historical consciousness.

A: I could put this even more simply. In the everyday life of someone who lives in Cologne, cities such as Amsterdam, Brussels, London, and Paris are just as important as Berlin, perhaps even more important, because they are simply so close. If that is so in everyday life, then as a historian I have to keep this in mind and work accordingly. This means that national boundaries and spaces of reference are outdated. As a historian, therefore, one should try to reflect these facts in one's own work, even if it is sometimes difficult.

G: That is precisely what the Institute is trying to achieve today with its many multilateral projects and activities. Peter Alter, Lothar Kettenacker, many thanks for speaking with me.