

Area Studies in German historiography

By Ewald Frie

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Prof. Ewald Frie presented some reflections about area studies in German historiography by highlighting two dimensions. Firstly, as a historian, he focused on the origin and tradition of German area studies back into the 19th and 20th century. Secondly, he elaborated on the future of German area studies.

At First, Prof. Ewald Frie explained that there is a long tradition of doing research on areas within Germany, that is *Landesgeschichte* as German provincial history up to the 19th century. This *Landesgeschichte* was revolutionized around World War I, and somehow reorganized partly as *Volksgeschichte* (folk history), which means history of the people. In the 1930s, *Volksgeschichte* was intertwined with young scholars who then became fascists. The general idea here was to find out what a people, a folk, or a race was really about. Research was meant to be interdisciplinary, bringing together historians, linguists, ethnologists, biologists, and so on. After 1945, the *Volksgeschichte* went on with this interdisciplinary approach, but without its openly fascist undertones. The formula that came into use, and is still being used by many historians in *Landesgeschichte* in Germany today, is “In Grenzen unbegrenzt”, which means borderless within borders. In a properly defined space, there was a chance for any disciplinary, methodological or theoretical approach that proved to be productive and compatible.

In the 1970s, there was a new approach to area of studies in Germany called *Regionalgeschichte*, which can be broadly translated into English as “regional history”. *Regionalgeschichte* means regions are not something that naturally exist, but on the contrary are intentionally produced by researchers. Besides, the studies of different European areas became well developed in Germany. There is also a tradition in Germany to do study great power history in the 19th 20th centuries, focusing on political history, the concept of Europe, and the bipolar world among other things. And then there was interest in special European regions, like Britain, France, but also Eastern Europe (Poland, Czechoslovakia, or Russia). Not so common was an interest in Spain & Iberian history, and in Italian history. Very uncommonly, you would find people doing Scandinavian or Southeastern European history.

Now what about regions beyond Europe? There is, for example, North American history. And then the other regions or area studies beyond these regions. At most German universities these studies were conducted outside history departments, in China studies department with a chair in Chinese history, Japanese studies department with a chair in Japanese history, or American studies departments with a chair in American history.

There was not much communication between these area studies and the history departments that mostly did German, European and North American history. There was a kind of a divide. And you can see

this mirrored in the structures of a typical German history department. You would find a chair or two in ancient history, in medieval, in early modern, in late modern, and in contemporary history, and without saying, everyone would know that these would usually cover German or European history. There might be contemporary history, chairs with a specialization in the history of France, of Great Britain, but mostly no more. Sometimes there were chairs in American history and in Russian history. This has to do with the Cold War after 1945. And there were – rarely – chairs for the study of non-European history. Most of the history departments in German universities are following this pattern until today. Of course, there was a hidden master narrative behind this organization that history is all about modernization, about Europe, or about the West, or about the West and its enemies, so the East. This has been the ultimate, uncontested master narrative organizing the historiography in Germany until today.

Now, all this has changed. Generally, the structure of history departments still looks the same. But by doing our research, the meanings of the structures have been changed from within. Prof. Frie explained this by giving some examples from the Tübingen history department. First, professors in ancient history and early medieval history in Tübingen have joined forces to reevaluate the Völkerwanderung or migration period idea between late antiquity and the Middle Ages. They do this by broadening their scope from Western Europe and the Mediterranean to a contact zone encompassing Western Asia, the Indian Ocean, and Northern Africa. They formed a center for advanced studies called Migration and Mobility in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, where they invite fellows from all over the world to discuss their ideas and findings.

Second, a team of Early Modernists is following the trails of German Jesuits to Asia and Latin America. Interested in global encounters and their consequences, they also follow the trails of Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans coming to and living in Central Europe from the 16th to 18th Century. The group's research focuses on knowledge production and knowledge transfer in and between Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Actually, a book called *Decentering the Enlightenment: Local Knowledge, Emotions, and Translated Practices in the German Cultural Encyclopedia* is on the way. Third, Prof. Klaus Gestwa, a specialist in Russian and Soviet history does contemporary environmental history in frontier regions, the polar world, and in the steppe and the desert regions in central Asia. He works with anthropologists to find out how migrants make their living and produce new world, transforming or destroying their environment relying on knowledge and experience from the worlds they came from. The other field Prof. Klaus Gestwa is working in is nuclear techno-politics of the Soviet Union including projects on atomic cities or nuclear research centers. His research is interdisciplinary, stretching from the local to the global. The fourth example refers to a collaborative research center that studies basic patterns of social order under threat on the basis of case studies from a broad range of time periods and regional settings.

Now these examples show that when global history started its boom in Germany after the end of the Cold War, German history departments did not change the setting of areas they had been concentrating on so far. The chronological order of studying history at German history departments has not been (and probably will not be) substituted with a focus on regional history and on comparison. However, a “my time and my area in contact approach” has been developed. Scholars are now interested in frontier regions, in encounters, in flows that blur the lines between areas. A keen interest has been evolving in rivers, lakes, oceans, and harbor studies, in migration, traveling ideas, and commodity change, and in the last two years, in viruses and epidemics. As Prof. Frie explained, research questions have been developed in order to transcend certain areas, and to come back. Cases are being connected and compared not to find differences and to highlight the specificities of regions, but to find similarities and causal mechanisms that work in more than one or just a few regions, serving as a common ground for inter-area studies.

At the end of his speech, Prof. Ewald Frie expressed that cross-regional expertise is still limited, and that's why he loves opportunities like this one to combine the strength of area studies by linking up to Chinese or Japanese studies with their ideas. Area Studies have become “Area in Contact Studies”, or “Encountering Area Studies”, as every place on the globe is, eventually, connected.