Historians between Confrontation and Cooperation

*Toward a Global Community of Historians* is a slightly abridged and supplemented English version of Karl Dietrich Erdmann’s *Die Ökumene der Historiker*, originally published in 1987, which examined the international community of historians from the turn of the twentieth century to the 1980s.[1] The present study can (in a certain respect) be called “ecumenical” as well—Erdmann, one of the most influential German historians from the 1950s through the 1980s, was an adherent to *Historismus* (or *Neo-Historismus*, as he sometimes labels his approach), whereas Wolfgang J. Mommsen, who contributed the last chapter on the period 1980 to 2000, had called early in his career for a “Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Historismus.”[2]

Erdmann is particularly concerned with the theoretical and methodological debates among historians. The self-conception of historical scholarship thus forms one of the key aspects of this study; others include the organizational history of the congresses and the International Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS), as well as the external political conditions and internal political tendencies that shaped the debates among historians. Erdmann also devotes special attention to Germany’s role in the congresses’ history. Most chapters cover one specific congress, examining the preparation efforts involved, the congress’s program, its main debates and, finally, its reception in the respective national historical journals. Since the congresses between 1960 and 1985 displayed similar characteristics (regarding the relations between East and West as well as the congress’s organization and conception of programs), Erdmann shifts to a topical approach for this period.

The beginnings of the international congresses were initiated from outside the historical professions. Rene de Maulde-La Claviere, a trained historian who then took up an administrative career, had previously launched the Société d’histoire diplomatique in 1886, which not only promoted the publication of diplomatic documents on an international scale, but also argued for cooperation among historians, archivists and diplomats from various countries. In order to advance the Société’s international aspect, de Maulde decided in 1897 to stage regular historical congresses. The first one, which took place in The Hague in 1898, attracted not only professional historians but also amateurs and a considerable number of diplomats. Thus it was mostly concerned with diplomatic history, and the “Lamprechtstreit” and other contemporary problems of historical theory and methodology went unnoticed. This orientation, however, was to change soon, and during the third congress in Rome in 1903, methodological debates figured prominently.

Erdmann argues convincingly that politics played a significant role in the history of the congresses from their origins. Reflecting the two opposing tendencies of nationalism and cosmopolitanism in world politics around 1900, the congresses served as a stage for both increased international cooperation on the one hand and national and ideological self-promotion on the other. The Paris congress in 1900, for example, saw heated debates be-
between Romanian and Hungarian historians about the so-called Daco-Romanic continuity theory, an idea of considerable importance for the development of the Romanian nation’s political self-awareness. Similarly, at the Warsaw congress in 1933, a delegation of German historians argued that the Polish state had to be seen as a multinational entity, comparable to the former Habsburg Empire—a view that their Polish colleagues, for understandable reasons, opposed vehemently. In order to support the German point of view, the director of the Prussian State Archives, Albert Brackmann, had previously published a collection of essays on Polish-German relations, featuring among others authors such as Hans Rothfels and Hermann Aubin. In the light of recent studies on German Ostforschung in the 1930s, Erdmann’s point of view that the collection “tried to avoid the revisionist tendencies of the times” (p. 145) appears fairly questionable.

Since the early congresses, however, individual historians also sought to overcome this nationalism in their profession, which was often accompanied by a methodological shift from nation-state-oriented political history to transnational social and economic history. John Franklin Jameson, editor of the American Historical Review and director of the Carnegie Foundation’s historical research institute, had called in 1913 for the establishment of a permanent international body in order to further increase the scholarly cooperation promoted at the congresses. Again, the initiative came not from “the old centers of historical research, but rather from outside” (p. 72). Erdmann cites numerous examples of the complacency of (especially British and German) historians who doubted the scholarly value of periodic meetings or an international historical association. In fact, both organizational efforts by American historians and financial assistance from the Rockefeller Foundation proved to be crucial for the founding of the ICHS in Geneva in 1926.

The ICHS statutes assigned the organization two tasks: to promote the historical sciences through international cooperation, and to oversee the International Congresses. Perhaps inevitably, the ICHS’s emphasis always was on the congresses, whereas it “gained the desired organizational conjunction with the practical work of the ever-ramifying branches of historiography only through the gradual inclusion of autonomous specialized international associations” (p. 111). However, the founding of the ICHS did have a significant impact on the organization of the individual nations’ historical disciplines: since the individual countries had to be represented by national committees, the ICHS prompted the creation of national historical associations in countries such as France, England, Italy and Denmark.

After rising political tensions and the outbreak of World War II had hampered (or even prevented) historians’ cooperation for a decade, the early postwar years saw efforts to rebuild the international community. The emerging Cold War certainly contributed to the quick reintegration of German, Italian, Austrian and Japanese scholars, all of whom participated at the first postwar Congress in Paris in 1950. Five years later, historians of the eastern bloc also joined the international scholarly community. Despite the problems that Cold War tensions repeatedly created for historians’ cooperation, the period from 1960 on was characterized by a “distinctly ‘ecumenical’ evolution of the historical congresses” (p. 244). The encounter between Marxist-Leninist and “western” conceptions of history is one of the main themes in Erdmann’s book, and he argues that the influence of undogmatic Marxists in western European countries (Ernest Labrousse and Eric Hobsbawm, among others) contributed to the “thaw” between the two “camps” from the late 1950s onward. Given his own methodological and political position, Erdmann reveals a general remarkable openness toward Marxist scholarship, recognizing that “the historiography of historical materialism is anything but a homogenous, monolithic bloc” (p. 236). One wishes that German conservatives, including Erdmann, had displayed a similar openness toward diverging approaches and interpretations within the German historical profession.

In his analysis of methodological and theoretical debates, Erdmann emphasizes the prominence of social and cultural history at the congresses and often sees “political history on the defense” (p. 220). Erdmann does not substantiate this claim statistically, but it seems possible that a social or a cultural historian might have come to a different conclusion. In any case, Erdmann’s evaluation raises the question of to what extent the contributions to the respective congresses represented the state of the art at the time. Unfortunately, his study does not address this issue.

The place of the German historical profession within the global community of historians runs as a thread through the study, and Erdmann emphasizes that immediately after World War II, West German historians became full-fledged members of the international community, free of the nationalist sentiments of the past. However, Gerhard Ritter, who figures prominently in this success story, is hardly a good principal witness, as a recent
biography has revealed.[4] More generally, despite the internationalist rhetoric they displayed, most West German historians after 1945 remained for a while in their academic trenches, vigorously advancing the “German cause.” Before the congress in Rome in 1955, Hermann Aubin, chairman of the Deutscher Historikerverband, instructed his colleague Theodor Schieder how to prevent a debate if the notorious “war guilt question” about August 1914 were to be brought up. After all, Aubin argued, if German historians had been successful on that battlefield after World War I, why shouldn’t they now proceed in the same fashion? [5]

While Erdmann’s account of Germany’s role in the congresses thus ranges from euphemistic to apologetic, the book is, in many other respects, a solid and very convincing study. It offers a subtle and fair analysis of methodological debates as well as of the intersection between history and politics. Anyone interested in these questions will find Erdmann’s study very useful.

Notes


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