

‚Foreign Science Policy‘ – Blog des Kulturwissenschaftlichen Instituts Essen (KWI-Blog)

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‚Foreign Science Policy‘ How a Concept (and Memory Politics) Fueled Debates on the Portrayal of German History Abroad Von: Stefan Laffin

Temporal and semantic dimensions loomed large in Michael Stürmer’s assertion that “those who fill the memory, coin concepts and interpret the past” would be in an authoritative position to have a bearing on the figuration of the future.¹ The stakes were high in the 1980s, after the proclaimed ‘spiritual-moral turn’ (*geistig moralische Wende*) and, more particularly, during the public debate on the place of Nazism for the German self-image, a controversy commonly referred to as *Historikerstreit*. To “win the future”, as the conservative political historian Stürmer put it, would mean to wield first discursive and then consequentially political power in terms of acts in practice. Not for nothing, the notion of cultural hegemony in the nation state – one which Peter Glotz from the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) declared as failed in terms of the envisaged reinterpretation of the Kohl administration – gained center stage for the Federal Chancellery (*Bundeskanzleramt*), which took an avid interest in the historian’s dispute.²

His emphasis on the semantic content of terms notwithstanding, Stürmer can certainly not be considered a trailblazer for the kind of historical semantics that became increasingly influential in subsequent years.³ He was also not alone in stressing the significance of concepts and its political relevance. More than a decade before, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) had actually established a project group tasked to study the semantics of political discourse and derive benefit from this for their campaigning.⁴ Awareness of the bearing of coining terms upon political discourse only grew in subsequent years.⁵ Taking a similar line, that is, identifying the potential of the efficacy of concepts, albeit from a different perspective (both politically and academically), it was not by chance that Jürgen Habermas lambasted Stürmer’s statements. The social philosopher implied that the historian utilized history for identity-establishing purposes, engaging in the business of sense-making rather than critically investigating the past. The crafting of a historically distorted German identity was the ultimate goal, or so Habermas argued in his famous article which set off the *Historikerstreit*.⁶

Endowing German history with added, and nuanced, meaning not solely resting on the Holocaust was in line with the politics of memory as promoted by Helmut Kohl. Somewhat consistently, Stürmer had worked as foreign policy advisor to the Chancellor during the first half of the 1980s. It was this dual function that, in a sense, predestined him to be actively involved in the establishment of the German Historical Institute (GHI) in Washington, which came into being in 1987. The discussions revolving around its inception mirrored the front

lines of the historian's debate. Most notably, however, the GHI embodied an emphasis on the German government's foreign science policy which was in line with other projects that denoted a proactive approach, in particular in the field of history.⁷

Whereas the historian's dispute was an inherently domestic debate insofar as the epistemological interest catered to German history, foreign science policy was international in its logics. While this is not the place to elaborate upon the ways in which foreign science policy, foreign cultural policy, development policy, or more recently, science diplomacy differ, it is nonetheless striking how discussions on terminology had gained steam throughout the 1970s. A memorandum in the *Auswärtiges Amt* outlined how the term science foreign policy (*Auswärtige Wissenschaftspolitik*) was established to distinguish it from the issue of development policy.⁸ Semantics were clearly at play here. The research ministry's introduction of the new term, so the foreign office surmised, would aim at having a foot in the door, in other words to expand institutional reach and acquire additional funds from the federal government budget. The *Auswärtiges Amt* feared being sidelined in the discussions about how a scientific foreign policy could take shape, and losing its grip on a science policy conceived of as an instrument of foreign policy.⁹

To name things and to develop concepts like a foreign science policy go a long way towards leaving a mark in the respective field. Definitional considerations were directed at an institutionalization of funds for said policies which ultimately enabled the research ministry to engage, that is, sponsor practices of a foreign science policy. In the practical field, these deliberations reverberated strongly. Admittedly, such a strategy especially unfolded in the field of natural sciences and technology. The widespread initiation and finalization of agreements on scientific and technical cooperation (STCs) provide ample evidence for that. Yet while science and technology usually received more prominence in the discourse of a foreign science policy than the humanities, with the field of archeology perhaps the noteworthy exception, there is something to be said about the place of academic liberal arts institutes abroad.¹⁰ Together with the politics of memory as initially outlined, the palpable stress on a foreign science policy affected disciplines such as archeology, art history, or history, too. The foundations of German historical institutes in Paris (1958) and London (1976), the full absorption of the art historical institute in Florence in the federal budget (1970), the establishment of the German Study Center in Venice (1972), the installation of a branch of the German archeological institute in Lisbon (1971), or the expansion of the research focus of the German historical institute in Rome well into the 20th century all took place against that backdrop. What they all shared, especially with the emphasis on contemporary history cautiously approaching the period of Nazism and German occupations in World War II, was the involvement of mediating a more nuanced image of Germany abroad. Demarcation lines between foreign cultural policy and foreign science policy played a part, as this also involved ministerial competence besides the mentioned conceptual unfolding in this sector. This was particularly why German ministries saw an additional value and why the *Auswärtiges Amt* keenly observed the operating of institutes abroad.

That language means power, that those who define concepts and terms can also wield institutional power if they succeed in translating their semantic efforts into institutionalizing policies and thereby having funds available to implement practices is a rather old hat.

Similarly, Stürmer's attempt to lay down the parameters of historical memory, to "set the course for the socio-political development of the federal republic in the next decade", zeroed in on coining, or occupying, certain terms such as identity, nation, patriotism.¹¹

The potential efficacy, indeed the creation of realities through language has been examined specifically for other policy areas, but it can also be traced for the field of science policy.¹² That this does not only play out in the arena of the abstract-conceptual but governs our perception of reality and thus creates new realities is one of conceptual history's principal arguments. In the founding history of the German Historical Institute Washington, opened in 1987 to the public, one can see these aspects condensed, as in how it ingrained itself with the political-institutional history of German memory politics in the 1980s.

While historians had long argued for the creation of an institute in the United States, it was specifically in the mid-1980s that these plans gained traction. The aforementioned politics of history pursued by the Kohl administration helped a great deal to turn the ambitious ideas into reality. Tedious discussions about the GHI's line of research followed, though. This was because of the major political implications which the German government expected from the GHI's maneuvering within the research environment and its corresponding imprint on the memory culture.

To summarize these discussions, the Kohl administration imagined the GHI as a counterweight to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which had opened its doors in 1980. Fearing negative ramifications on the national image up to the point that the country would be perceived abroad to be synonymous with the Holocaust, political actors made their intentions clear in the discussions.¹³ The political impetus, to contribute to a "more complete perception of Germany" and German history at a "time of strong impressions made by the memory of the Holocaust in the United States" also led to a defined research agenda as wished for by political actors.¹⁴

While one focus should be on the emergence and characteristics of industrial societies, for which the United States could claim to be perhaps the most pivotal case, every now and then another purpose flared up, too.¹⁵ This was specifically true for the actors in the federal chancellery, who declared in internal communications that they would also appreciate it if the GHI Washington would turn its attention to the investigation of the German resistance against Nazism. Thereby, it was hoped, the sheer existence of such a resistance would be publicized in the United States so that the dominant narrative offered by the Holocaust museum could be put in a wider perspective.¹⁶ The politics of memory reverberated strongly here when the officials in the federal chancellery ruminated on ways that the GHI could promulgate or utilize the exhibition concepts of the German Historical Museum and the *Haus der Geschichte*.

In this way, it was all the more upsetting for these public officials to see how the program of the GHI unfolded after its opening in 1987. While the opening itself, where among others Heinrich August Winkler talked in the very first annual lecture about how German identity would be inextricably linked to the Holocaust, could be considered a rapprochement to those circles that eyed the GHI Washington critically, the program the GHI subsequently devised

marked a noticeable departure from the ideas circulating in the Federal Chancellery.¹⁷ The potential focus areas as elaborated upon by the first director in the first published bulletin of the GHI did not mention German resistance to the Nazi regime.¹⁸ Even worse for the reflections by public officials, early lectures followed suit by shining the spotlight on the Nazi terror or the formation of political culture in the *Bundesrepublik* against the backdrop of Nazism.¹⁹ That most of these public lectures did so from a decisively leftist perspective and that they were at times sponsored by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation did not go unnoticed. In fact, it was Kohl himself who intervened and urged the Konrad Adenauer Foundation to likewise come into the picture as sponsor of public lectures in Washington.²⁰ Grave concerns that the institute would “take a development, which characterizes itself with the lectures series” in which only academics from the political left would speak were behind Kohl’s intervention.²¹ Many conservative historians had at that point already anticipated this evolution of the GHI, which could also be described as an emancipation process from its mostly political foundation logics. Perhaps not by chance, they were also the ones standing firmly on the other side of the leftist academics who dominated the first lecture series in the initially mentioned *Historikerstreit*, who would now leave the GHI’s academic advisory board.²²

Focusing on the foundation and evolution of the GHI Washington can thereby reveal in what ways and to what extent the sociopolitical climate but also developments in the state-operated and -sponsored science policy itself manifested themselves in academic institutes abroad. What is more, conceptual and methodological pitfalls loom large – the hints at the formative power of a science policy abroad by means of the GHI for a politically suitable mediation of a more nuanced image of Germany, and hence a classical scope of a foreign cultural policy, point to the necessity of also taking different concepts and the intentions linked to them into consideration.

References

1. Michael Stürmer, „Geschichte in geschichtslosem Land,“ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 25, 1986. All the quotes in this contribution have been translated by the author.
2. The *Bundeskanzleramt* compiled a rich documentation of the *Historikerstreit* and wrote numerous memoranda, judgmental synopses, and even penned – in the person of Wolfgang Schäuble – an article engaging with the complex of issues being at the basis of the dispute. For Glotz’s remarks see Peter Glotz, „Wider das „nationale Prinzip“,“ in *Erben deutscher Geschichte. DDR – BRD: Protokolle einer historischen Begegnung*, ed. Susanne Miller and Malte Ristau (Rowohlt, 1988), 88–93.
3. Historical Semantics (but also conceptual history) is understood here as a gradual development, or realignment, of the older *Begriffsgeschichte*.

4. N.N., „Bestimmte Zeichen,“ *Der Spiegel*, August 4, 1974, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/bestimmte-zeichen-a-f509624a-0002-0001-0000-000041651690>. One of the driving forces, Gerhard Mahler, was quoted in the article that the CDU would need to concern itself with the “semantic quality of their statements” and that the language of the party in general would be too “boring” and “blasé”. See further Kristoffer Klammer, „Gewinn oder neue Hürde im politischen Alltag? Sprachreflexion als Element politischer Kommunikation und gegenwärtige Herausforderung (1949–2021),“ *Historische Zeitschrift* 317, no. 1 (2023): 95–128, in particular 104f., <https://doi.org/10.1515/hzhz-2023-0022>.
5. Wolfgang Bergsdorf (ed.), *Wörter als Waffen. Sprache als Mittel der Politik* (Bonn Aktuell, 1979).
6. Jürgen Habermas, „Eine Art Schadensabwicklung. Die apologetischen Tendenzen in der deutschen Zeitgeschichtsschreibung,“ *Die ZEIT*, July 11, 1986. As widely known, Habermas took Stürmer to task together with Andreas Hillgruber, Klaus Hildebrand, and Ernst Nolte.
7. Rüdiger Graf, „Geschichte wird gemacht. Helmut Kohl als Public Historian“, in *Public Historians. Zeithistorische Interventionen nach 1945*, ed. Frank Bösch, Stefanie Eisenhuth and Hanno Hochmuth (Wallstein, 2021), 261–273. The *Haus der Geschichte* marks presumably the most famous case in point, <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783835347489-260>.
8. Political Archive of the German Foreign Archive, B 58, Vol. 1049, Entwicklungshilfe, Technische Hilfe, Kapitalhilfe, 1951–1974. Memorandum by Department III B 2, 14 February 1969.
9. Ibid. Memorandum by Department III B 3, March 6, 1969.
10. Marie Vigener, „Ein wichtiger kulturpolitischer Faktor“. *Das Deutsche Archäologische Institut zwischen Wissenschaft, Politik und Öffentlichkeit, 1918–1954* (Marie Leidorf, 2012).
11. Dieter Hoffmann, „Editorial“, *Vorgänge* 84, no. 6 (1986): 38.
12. Kristin Kuck, *Krisenszenarien. Metaphern in wirtschafts- und sozialpolitischen Diskursen* (de Gruyter, 2018). For the concept of foreign science policy, this conceptual reflection, and a thorough discussion of how it relates to other concepts and notions (development aid, foreign cultural policy, etc.) still remains to be done. Carola Sachse’s conceptual pair of *Außenwissenschaftspolitik* and *Wissenschaftsaußenpolitik* can provide useful insights in this regard: Carola Sachse, *Wissenschaft und Diplomatie. Die Max-Planck-Gesellschaft im Feld der internationalen Politik (1945–2000)* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023), 21f.
13. Jacob S. Eder, *Holocaust Angst. The Federal Republic of Germany and American Holocaust Memory since the 1970s*, (Oxford University Press, 2016), 95f. See also Scott Krause, „Weltweit vor Ort: Geschichtspolitik gegen wissenschaftliche Interessen. Die Kontroversen um die Gründung des Deutschen Historischen Instituts Washington vor 30 Jahren,“ *Weltweit vor Ort. Das Magazin der Max Weber Stiftung* 2 (2017): 6–9.
14. Federal Archive Koblenz, B 136/24443, 27020 De 2 Errichtung des Deutschen Historischen Instituts in Washington, 1983–1988. Günther van Well (German Ambassador to the United States) to *Auswärtiges Amt*, November 26, 1984, 2.

15. Interestingly enough and speaking to the political and academic logics being at dagger's dawn at times, the candidacy of perhaps the most eminent German historian working on the formation and features of industrial societies in a comparative perspective for the position of the first director of the GHI Washington was spurned. The candidate's profile simply did not match the political impetus associated with the establishment of the GHI and its political-history mission.
16. Federal Archive Koblenz, B 136/24443, 27020 De 2 Errichtung des Deutschen Historischen Instituts in Washington, 1983–1988. Claus A. Lutz to Helmut Kohl, May 6, 1986, 2.
17. Ibid. Jürgen Ruhfus (German Ambassador to the United States) to *Auswärtiges Amt*, December 1, 1987.
18. German Historical Institute Washington, D.C., *Bulletin*, no. 1 (1987): 6–11. They mentioned, however, some topic related to the history of Nazism, such as the politics of eugenics and euthanasia. See *ibid.*, 11.
19. R. Maria Lepsius and Jürgen Kocka spoke about the political culture in Germany after 1945, Susanne Miller about social democracy in Europe, and Hans Mommsen delivered a talk on the November pogrom 1938, to just name the most obvious examples at which some officials in the German apparatus of state took offense.
20. Federal Archive Koblenz, B 136/24443, 27020 De 2 Errichtung des Deutschen Historischen Instituts in Washington, 1983–1988. Helmut Kohl to Bruno Heck, November 8, 1988.
21. Ibid. Claus A. Lutz to Helmut Kohl, November 7, 1988.
22. Michael Stürmer and Klaus Hildebrand resigned from the academic advisory board after realizing that the direction of the GHI would not correspond with their ideas of (a politics of) history.

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