Barbara Korte, Sylvia Paletschek (eds.)
Popular History Now and Then
Editorial

The series Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen | History in Popular Cultures provides analyses of popular representations of history from specific and interdisciplinary perspectives (history, literature and media studies, social anthropology, and sociology). The studies focus on the contents, media, genres, as well as functions of contemporary and past historical cultures.

The series is edited by Barbara Korte and Sylvia Paletschek (executives), Hans-Joachim Gehrke, Wolfgang Hochbruck, Sven Kommer and Judith Schlehe.
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It is a commonplace by now to state that the popular representation of history is booming.¹ This rising interest in history emerged in the 1980s, and it has been at a peak since the second half of the 1990s. This trend is reflected in such indicators as increasing numbers of visitors to historical exhibitions and museums; considerable public interest in controversies among historical experts;² and the prominence of historical topics in new and old media, in documentary and fictional genres, or in performative forms (theme parks, living history and re-enactments). Numerous websites on the internet, articles on Wikipedia, CD-ROM productions and historical computer games attest the phenomenon’s expansion into the digital media. We witness these trends all over the world, in the global North as well as increasingly in the global South. In many cultures, representations of history are of major significance for the negotiation of national, ethnic and regional identities. The contemporary re-turn to history helps to construct continuity and orienta-

¹ For their help in editing this volume, we would like to thank Natalie Churn, Kathrin Göb and Kerstin Lohr.

² A German instance is the controversy surrounding the Wehrmachtsausstellung in the 1990s – an exhibition focusing on the war crimes of German soldiers on the Eastern Front during the Second World War. For Britain, one could name the recent debate about the bicentenary of the abolition of slavery in 2007 (cf. Korte/Pirker 2011).
tion. But engagement with history, particularly through popular display, can also satisfy the need for emotional and aesthetic experience and for adventure, for a risk-free encounter with what is strange, different or ›other‹ and, finally, for relaxation and diversion. At the same time, public and state organisations, social elites and political groups draw on popular images of history to legitimise either the status quo or political change.

However, this peak of historical activity and interest is not unprecedented. This volume therefore looks at manifestations of popular history between 1800 and the present, investigating differences and continuities. Its contributions deal with various social and political conditions for heightened historical interest in the past, looking at a range of periods and cultures in Western and Southern Europe, North America as well as West Africa.

Stefan Berger discusses the borderlines and interrelations between popular and academic history since 1800, concluding with some of the pros and cons of the current pluralisation of history. Billie Melman points out the fascination which a newly discovered, or rather uncovered Assyrian past had for Victorian Britons who were aware of the modernity of their own society but, at the same time, were reminded by archaeology that their own growing empire might one day join the chain of those great realms already destroyed in the course of the ages. An impressive remnant of the Assyrian empire, the Bull of Nineveh, was thus not only admired as a spectacle, but also interpreted as a warning sign. How important a concern history was for Victorian society also emerges from Leslie Howsam’s investigation of the presence of the past in the contemporary periodical press. Howsam shows how in the life of a Victorian reader it was almost impossible to escape history, and how these readers were impregnated with historical knowledge from a very young age; in the »life-cycle« of the readers, layers of historical knowledge were continually added to that early foundation and crucially influenced readers’ ideas about their nation’s past and their own contemporary lifeworlds. Barbara Korte and Sylvia Paletschek also address the flourishing magazine market of the mid-nineteenth century. In a comparison of leading publications for family reading, Die Gartenlaube in Germany and Household Words and All the Year Round in Britain, they demonstrate similarities and differences in the choice of historical topics and forms of representation. While the print market truly popularised historical knowledge, individuals’ historical interests were not always eas-
ily satisfied. In the nineteenth century, amateurs and professionals increasing-ingly demanded access to archives, but, as Philipp Müller shows for a Bavarian case, the ›opening‹ of the archive was still highly limited when political interests were at stake.

Novels have long been recognised as a popular medium for presenting history; this is also acknowledged in Birte Förster’s discussion of how the image of the highly popular Prussian Queen Louise (1776-1810) was con-tinually reshaped and pluralised during the nineteenth and twentieth cen-turies in accordance with changing conceptions of gender and feminine identity. The role of poetry in inscribing characters and events in the col-lective memory of a nation is less well researched to date. It is, however, explored in Stefanie Lethbridge’s analysis of the canonisation of (war) heroes through the reappearance of certain poems in anthologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Historical traditions are always constructed, and in some instances, their basis is not historical fact but purely invented. Such is the case for the barbershop ›revival‹ discussed by Frédéric Döhl. The allegedly ›traditional‹ pre-World War I performance of this style of a cappella singing was actu-ally invented in the 1940s, in nostalgic reaction to the experience of the 1930s Depression and the longing for an ›ideal‹ world. As Antonie Wiedem-ann shows for Italian society, the experience of an economic miracle could likewise spark an interest in history: In the 1960s, Italy saw a boom of popular magazines on history and art history that seems to have coun-tered an overwhelming concern with materiality in the present. Fernando Sánchez-Marcos presents results from his ongoing study of historical cul-ture related to the figure of Don Juan of Austria, the hero of the Battle of Lepanto. This study spans different media and European historical cultures and reveals the shifting images and reinterpretations of Don Juan according to changes in the zeitgeist, societal and religious norms. Till Förster’s case study of historical culture in northern Côte d’Ivoire reveals the intercon-nexions between politics, identity and history in a society experienc-ing various political upheavals and literally re-painting the image of the past over a stretch of only a few years.

If politics is a major shaper of historical imagery, so is the media. Susan Crane’s discussion is devoted to the relationship between photography, visual experience and the presence of images of the past in the long twenty- tieth century. Focusing on photo books, she analyses the paradoxical qual-
ity of photography’s relationship to historical consciousness: as preserver of the past and producer of presence. Jerome De Groot, in his afterword to this volume, reflects on possible developments of popular history. Taking successful television programmes of the twenty-first century as a case in point, De Groot demonstrates how the media continually come up with new inventive formats that re-create history for international audiences – a history which has to be, according to global markets and media flows, increasingly transnational and transcultural.

Overall, the contributions in this volume suggest certain lines of continuity: Firstly, popular representations of the past have existed since at least the early nineteenth century and are a form of production and dissemination of historical knowledge in their own right, rather than deriving top-down from academic knowledge. They are, secondly, marked by an affinity to lifeworlds in a double sense: an interest in the history of everyday life, and aspects that are important in the producers’ and audiences’ own lives. They satisfy a fascination with the authentic and factual, but tend, at the same time, to be personalised, emotionalised, dramatised and narrativised.3

Thirdly, one could claim that popular history has a share in the democratisation and pluralisation of modern societies, while it can also limit our approach to the past because certain periods, themes or historical actors are more easily adapted to present concerns, desires and intentions than others, for example because they fit into existing narratives, because they help to legitimise societal and political aims – or simply because they will entertain and sell. An important question, therefore, is not only what images of the past are generated, but also which ones are neglected at a certain time. Fourthly, how popular history is represented depends on the available media, genres, formats and institutions of a given time. There is a great variety within these media and genres, and a high degree of intermediality.

Despite the visibility and social significance of popular history, its study is still in its early stage.4 Further research will have to address a number of areas: reception studies, relating to audiences both of the present and the past; comparative approaches, especially comparisons between Western


4 For other recent volumes cf. De Groot (2009), Hardtwig/Schug (2009), Paletschek (2011) and Berger/Lorenz/Melman (2011).
and non-Western, Northern and Southern images and utilizations of the past, as well as comparisons in a historical perspective; the relationship between popular historical culture and the so-called knowledge society; and finally, the history of popular history and lines of continuity in popular representations of the past, a topic which this volume addresses from many different angles.

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What is a professional historian? Who calls themselves professional historians? Who calls others professional historians? The ancient historians Herodotus, Thukydides, Cicero, Livius and many others would not have used this term, despite the fact that they had already developed ideas about objectivity and truthfulness that professional historians were to later name as major characteristics of professional historiography. Nor would the medieval chroniclers and historians in their monasteries and courts have described themselves as ›professional‹. The humanist historians were men of letters, polymaths and intellectuals, but few of them would have recognised themselves as ›professionals‹. The methodological ground rules of what would, in the nineteenth century, be seen as hallmarks of a professional historiography, i.e. source criticism, objectivity, the desire to consult as many documents and primary sources and to read as much literature as possible to get an approximation of ›how it actually happened‹ (to use the famous phrase by Leopold von Ranke), and the use of auxiliary sciences in the pursuit of this aim – much of this had already been codified by Jean Mabillon, Johann Martin Chladenius and the Bollandist and Maurist historians in the seventeenth and early part of the eighteenth centuries. And would the eighteenth-century Enlightenment historians in France and Scotland, from Voltaire to David Hume, have been referred to as ›professional‹? Hardly – in fact in the British Isles, the most successful and widely read historians looked down their noses at academic history, because there was
little that was being produced there that merited attention. The Regius Professorships of History at Oxford and Cambridge, instituted in 1724, remained sinecures until the second half of the nineteenth century, and their incumbents produced little history and in fact rarely even lectured at the university (cf. Horn 1951: 21).

And yet, it is with Enlightenment historiography that we arguably get the first inkling of professional historiography in Europe – namely with the German-speaking Enlightenment, which was, unlike its Scottish and French counterparts, to a significant extent university-based (cf. Reill 1975). August Ludwig Schlözer and Johann Christoph Gatterer at the University of Göttingen (and, to a lesser extent, their counterparts at the University of Halle) not only began to codify the characteristics of a professional historiography, they also were at pains to attempt to write a history which sacrifices literary ambition and merit in favour of »scientific« worth. Combining questions and data on the demographics, economics, social statistics and political systems of a number of countries, the Göttingen historians tried to approach the past both in a »synchronistic« way, by comparing societies at a given moment, and diachronically, by chronologically unfolding events and thematic processes over time. The description of foreign »states« (»statistics« in the broader sense of the eighteenth century) and the collection of quantitative data (descriptive statistics in the modern sense) served their purpose well since they wanted to produce useful knowledge for the »enlightened« prince and his administration. That knowledge could only be useful if it was scientific. If that meant sacrificing their ambitions for a literary rendering of history, then so be it (cf. Eppe 2010: 86-106). From the time of the Göttingen historians onward, »scientificity« has been bound up with the idea of a professional historiography which must sacrifice literary concerns for the sake of greater truthfulness and objectivity, i.e. more scientificity.

1 An excellent summary of the professionalisation of history writing is provided by Thorstendahl (2002), who points out that the global beginnings of professionalisation can be located in China with Sima Qian, born in either 145 or 135 BC, the first historian employed by the court (Han dynasty) with an office and employees, who consistently reflected on the methods of how to write history properly.