

Contents

Popular History Now and Then:

An Introduction

Barbara Korte and Sylvia Paletschek | 7

Professional and Popular Historians:

1800 – 1900 – 2000

Stefan Berger | 13

The Bull of Nineveh:

Antiquity and Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Britain

Billie Melman | 31

Growing Up with History in the Victorian Periodical Press

Leslie Howsam | 55

Nineteenth-Century Magazines and Historical

Cultures in Britain and Germany:

Exploratory Notes on a Comparative Approach

Barbara Korte and Sylvia Paletschek | 73

The Opening of the Archives and Its Limits:

Contested Interests in »Týrol«

Philipp Müller | 105

Wars and ›Little‹ Heroes:

Historical Topics in Popular Poetry Anthologies

from the Nineteenth Century to the Present

Stefanie Lethbridge | 123

Popular History, Gender and Nationalism:

Female Narratives of a National Myth

Birte Förster | 149

**Creating Popular Music History:
The Barbershop Harmony Revival in the
United States around 1940**

Frédéric Döhl | 169

**»Quick, accessible to everyone and delightful«:
History and Art History in Popular Italian
Magazines of the 1960s**

Antonie R. Wiedemann | 185

**Don Juan de Austria in European Historical Culture:
The Twentieth-Century Metamorphosis of a Popular Hero**

Fernando Sánchez-Marcos | 203

**Shifting Imageries:
Memory, Projectivity and the Experience of
Violence in Northern Côte d'Ivoire**

Till Förster | 231

**Seeing the Past 1800 – 1900 – 2000:
History as a Photo Album**

Susan A. Crane | 263

Afterword: Past, Present, Future

Jerome De Groot | 281

List of Contributors | 297

Index | 301

Popular History Now and Then

An Introduction

BARBARA KORTE AND SYLVIA PALETSCHEK

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 un-covered 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 increasingly 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 continually reshaped and pluralised during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in accordance with changing conceptions of gender and feminine identity. The role of poetry in inscribing characters and events in the collective 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 actually invented in the 1940s, in nostalgic reaction to the experience of the 1930s Depression and the longing for an ›ideal‹ world. As Antonie Wiedemann 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 countered an overwhelming concern with materiality in the present. Fernando Sánchez-Marcos presents results from his ongoing study of historical culture 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 interconnections between politics, identity and history in a society experiencing 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 twentieth 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

3 Cf. Korte/Paletschek (2009), Pirker/Rüdiger et al. (2010), Schlehe/Uike-Bormann et al. (2010) and Gehrke/Sénécheau (2010).

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 utilisations 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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