



VHD

History of the *Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen in Deutschland* (VHD) – The Association for Historians in Germany

By Olaf Blaschke¹

Oppositional Beginnings

Europe's largest professional historians' association – today known as the *Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen in Deutschland* (VHD) – developed from moderate indignation and humble beginnings in 1893. It grew into the second-largest historians' association in the world, surpassed only by the American Historical Association (AHA), founded in 1884.

In 1892, Kaiser Wilhelm II demanded that teaching history in schools should be more strongly oriented towards the present. Instead of concentrating on ancient Greeks and Romans, it should focus on Germans and their history. Despite their love of the fatherland, this affronted high school teachers and history professors. They saw their professional honour and the autonomy of their discipline endangered. In 1893, 109 historians (all men) met in Munich and, after divisive discussions, they passed a resolution opposing purely political conviction-based teaching. This meeting went down in history as the first *Historikertag* (Historians' Day).

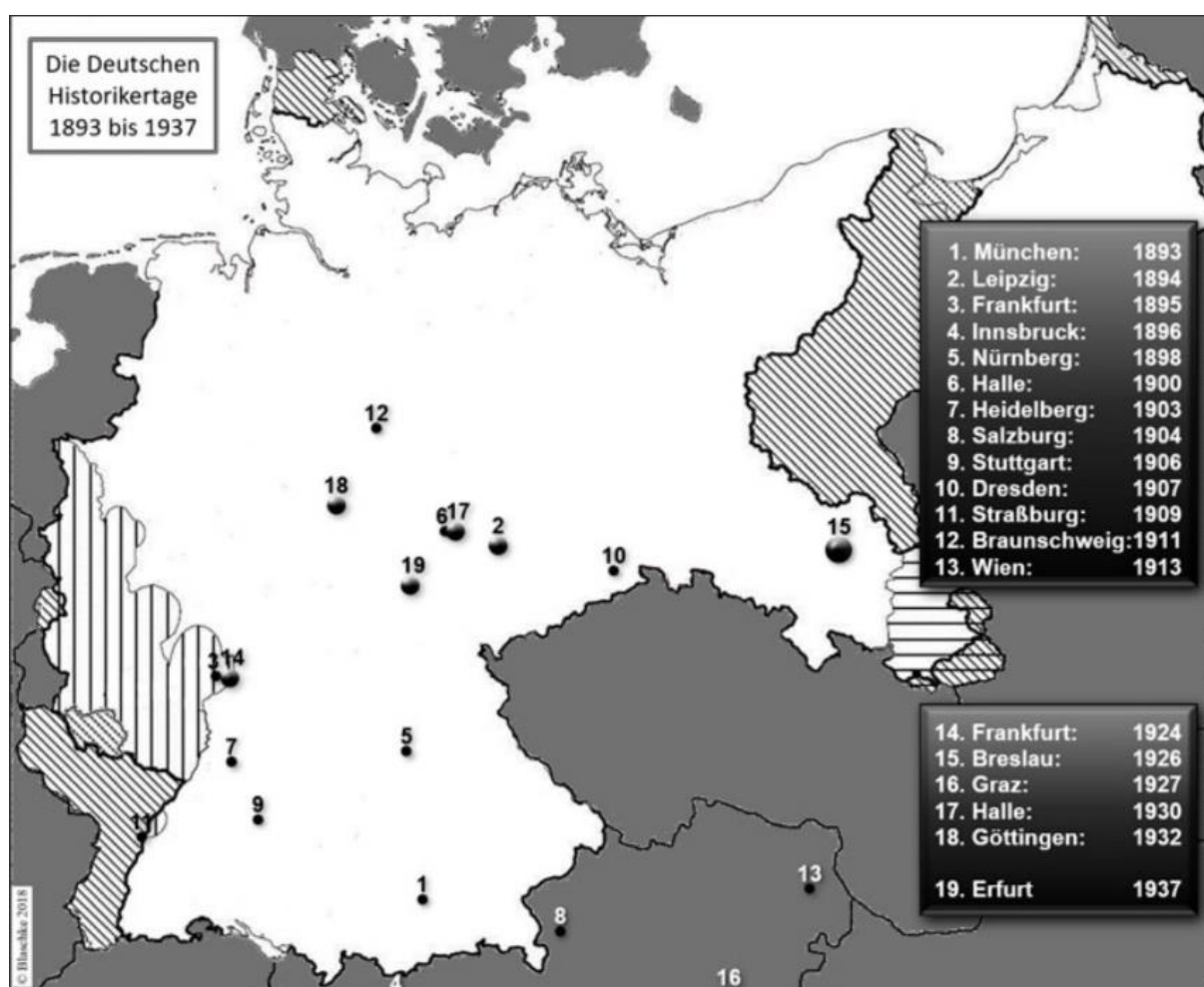
Founding of the Association in 1895

The following *Historikertage* in Leipzig and Frankfurt/Main, with their monarchical ovations, were less adversarial. In addition to the politicization of history teaching, problems with university seminars and access to state archives were addressed. It was finally decided that these meetings should happen regularly. A committee was formed to take care of the location and program as well as a fund to provide for the necessary expenses. The VHD was officially founded in Frankfurt/Main in 1895 "for the purpose of regularly organizing recurring meetings of German historians." Initially, the Association had no other tasks. The special interests of the profession were addressed, for example, by resolutions adopted during these *Historikertage* which until 1913 mainly

¹ English translation by Dr Rachel O'Sullivan.

took place in the southern German and Austrian regions. Berlin was reluctant to invite historians till 1964.

In the following decades, the VHD took on more and more tasks. While it was founded in 1895 as a product of the first three *Historikertage*, these now became the product of the professional association that organised them. From 1900 onward, historical and political questions concerning the current status of history teaching and research faded completely into the background of the *Historikertage*. Instead, they offered only specialized lectures on the past. They avoided the *Methodenstreit* (method controversy) instigated by Karl Lamprecht with his novel subject Cultural History as well as any political controversies. The VHD also had nothing to do with the International Historians' Days held in Paris from 1900. These prestigious forums were held every five years since 1903, except for the years during the two World Wars.



Historikertage and their locations between 1893 and 1937²

² All illustrations, graphics and maps created by Olaf Blaschke are taken from Matthias Berg et al. (eds.): Die versammelte Zunft. Historikerverband und Historikertage in Deutschland 1893–2000, 2 volumes, Göttingen 2018, cover and p. 41, 555, 561, 577, 712, 717. All citations can also be found there. The timelines (p. 498 and 741) illustrating the VHD chairmen/chairwoman and the *Historikertage* since 1949



The First World War and the Weimar Republic

The First World War formed a major caesura for the VHD. The archivist Joseph Hansen had been elected VHD chairman in 1913 and held this office for almost a decade, not one or two years like his predecessors, because of the war, post-war problems and the lack of member assemblies. Eleven years now passed between the 13th *Historikertag* in Vienna in 1913 and the 14th *Historikertag* in Frankfurt in 1924, during which even the members wondered whether the association still existed at all. And it took a full 15 years – from the 4th International Historians' Days in London in 1913 to the 6th in Oslo in 1928 – before German historians were once again welcome among the victorious Allied powers. In Brussels in 1923, German historians were still unwelcome. Despite this, selected German historians were already involved in the *Comité International des Sciences Historiques* (CISH), founded in 1926. This committee asked each of the national professional associations, which were also emerging in other countries, who should represent their country in the committee and on the international stage. This gave the VHD a second important task. The German delegates confidently took the position that the question of war guilt could not be decided by diplomats in Versailles, as had happened in 1919, but only by historians. Therefore, all countries involved should make their records accessible.

The German *Historikertage* also became more political: the first post-war *Historikertag* in Frankfurt/Main in 1924 was devoted to "Volk- und Raumgeschichte" (ethnic and spatial history); the 15th *Historikertag* in Breslau (today: Wrocław) in 1926 sent a clear signal regarding the borderland struggle against Slavic claims; the 16th *Historikertag* in Graz in 1927 expressed the hope for the "reunification" of the *Kaiserreich* (German Empire) and Austria. From the beginning, the association claimed to represent all German-speaking historians; this included even Swiss historians, who already had a professional association since 1841, but especially the Austrians. The last *Historikertag* to take place before National Socialist rule was held in Göttingen in 1932 and was yet again devoted to "Eastern problems." For the first time, a statute was adopted. According to this, the association was no longer only responsible for the national *Historikertage* and the co-organization of the International Historians' Days, but also, as a third task, for the "representation of the joint endeavours before the public and towards the authorities," as well as abroad. Six months later, the National Socialists came to power.



National Socialism 1933–1945

The medievalist Karl Brandi, Chairman of the VHD from 1932, manoeuvred the association between autonomy and adaptation to the new regime. On the one hand, he wanted to preserve the association's independence; meanwhile, the History Teachers' Association, founded in 1913, was incorporated into the National Socialist Teachers League in 1934. On the other hand, Brandi started to call himself the "Führer" of the VHD. Following a provocative suggestion in 1932, the next *Historikertag* was to be held in Danzig (today: Gdańsk) in the fall of 1934 and would be "borne by the spirit of the Third Reich" (Brandi, 1933). However, at the same time, the expected emphatic confessions in support of the new era were to be avoided; instead, the conference was to be limited to scholarly debates. Nevertheless, this did not happen as any public exchange, such as was planned, was not acceptable to the new ruling power. In fact, no further *Historikertage* would be organized by the VHD. Brandi was replaced in 1937 by the National Socialist Walter Platzhof. The leading Nazi historian Walter Frank and his *Reichsinstitut für die Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands* (Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany) pushed to the forefront of the "fighting" historians. He organized his own *Historikertag* in Erfurt in 1937, but formally and as a fig leaf, the VHD was allowed to lend its name one last time to this only "*Historikertag*" in the "thousand-year Reich." Now the VHD, a shadow of its former self, disappeared into insignificance. Without its elixir of life, the *Historikertage*, it withered away.

Reestablishment in 1949

After 1945, the victorious powers did not want to boycott German academia as they had done after 1918 but sought to immediately reintegrate it into the global community. For the 9th International Historians' Day in Paris in 1950, however, the Comité International needed a counterpart to address. This was one of the reasons why the VHD was newly founded in 1949 under the leadership of Gerhard Ritter and why the first *Historikertag* after the Second World War was held – in Munich, just like the first one in 1893.

Ritter was elected chairman, but the old structures and tasks of the VHD were retained. Nevertheless, with a separation of the *Ausschuss* (committee) and the *Vorstand* (board), leadership was made more efficient. The association no longer represented Austrians but claimed to be the sole representative of historians for all of Germany, including those of the "Eastern Zone."



Reception for the participants of the 20th Historikertag by the City of Munich in the Great Ballroom of Nymphenburg Palace on September 13, 1949. From right to left: Gerhard Ritter, Nils Ahnlund, Hedwig and Walter Goetz, unknown, unknown, Prince Adalbert of Bavaria; behind Ritter Franz Schnabel.

Cold War and the *Historiker-Gesellschaft* in the GDR

Initially, East German historians did take part in the VHD meetings. However, they demonstratively withdrew from the 24th *Historikertag* in Trier in 1958, thus causing a scandal, and founded their own professional association in the GDR: the *Historiker-Gesellschaft* (Historian's Society). During the German division, there was intense scheming and often polemical disputes about who was authorized to represent German historical scholarship at the International Historians' Days. The meetings developed into veritable "propaganda tournaments" between the two political systems during the Cold War. Proposals from the GDR had to be submitted through the desk of the VHD. It was not until the absurd International Historians' Day in Moscow in 1970 – a show dominated by Soviet historians on the 100th anniversary of Lenin's birth – that the CISH General Assembly decided to admit the GDR and both Korean states as members.

In addition to these arduous and time-consuming affairs, there were other crises around 1970: When history lessons were to be severely curtailed or replaced by social studies in some German federal states, the VHD was able to prove itself as an interest

group under Theodor Schieder, Werner Conze and Gerhard A. Ritter and successfully fend off the abolition of history as a school subject.

Still in the second half of the 20th century, the choice of location for the *Historikertag* was occasionally politically motivated, such as the decision in favour of West Berlin in 1964 after the construction of the Berlin Wall and, conversely, after its fall, the 40th *Historikertag* in Leipzig in 1994.

G. Ritter	H. Aubin	H. Rothfels	K. D. Erdmann	Th. Schieder	W. Conze	G. A. Ritter	C. Meier	W. J. Mommsen	L. Gall	J. Fried	M. Hildermeier	P. Funke	W. Plumpe	M. Schulze Wessel	E. Schlottheuber	Lutz Raphael																		
1949-1953	1953-1958	1958-1962	1962-1967	1967-1972	1972-1976	1976-1980	1980-1988	1988-1992	1992-1996	1996-2000	2000-2004	2004-2008	2008-2012	2012-2016	2016-2021	2021-																		
NZ	NZ/OE	NZ	NZ	NZ	NZ	NZ	AG	NZ	NZ	MA	OE	AG	WG	OE	MA	NZ																		
1949	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020																				
20. München: 1949	21. Marburg: 1951	22. Bremen: 1953	23. Ulm: 1956	24. Trier: 1958	25. Duisburg: 1962	26. Berlin: 1964	27. Freiburg: 1967	28. Köln: 1970	29. Regensburg: 1972	30. Braunschweig: 1974	31. Mannheim: 1976	32. Hamburg: 1978	33. Würzburg: 1980	34. Münster: 1982	35. Berlin: 1984	36. Trier: 1986	37. Bamberg: 1988	38. Bochum: 1990	39. Hannover: 1992	40. Leipzig: 1994	41. München: 1996	42. Frankfurt: 1998	43. Aachen: 2000	44. Halle: 2002	45. Kiel: 2004	46. Konstanz: 2006	47. Dresden: 2008	48. Berlin: 2010	49. Mainz: 2012	50. Göttingen: 2014	51. Hamburg: 2016	52. Münster: 2018	53. (München): 2021	54. Leipzig: 2023

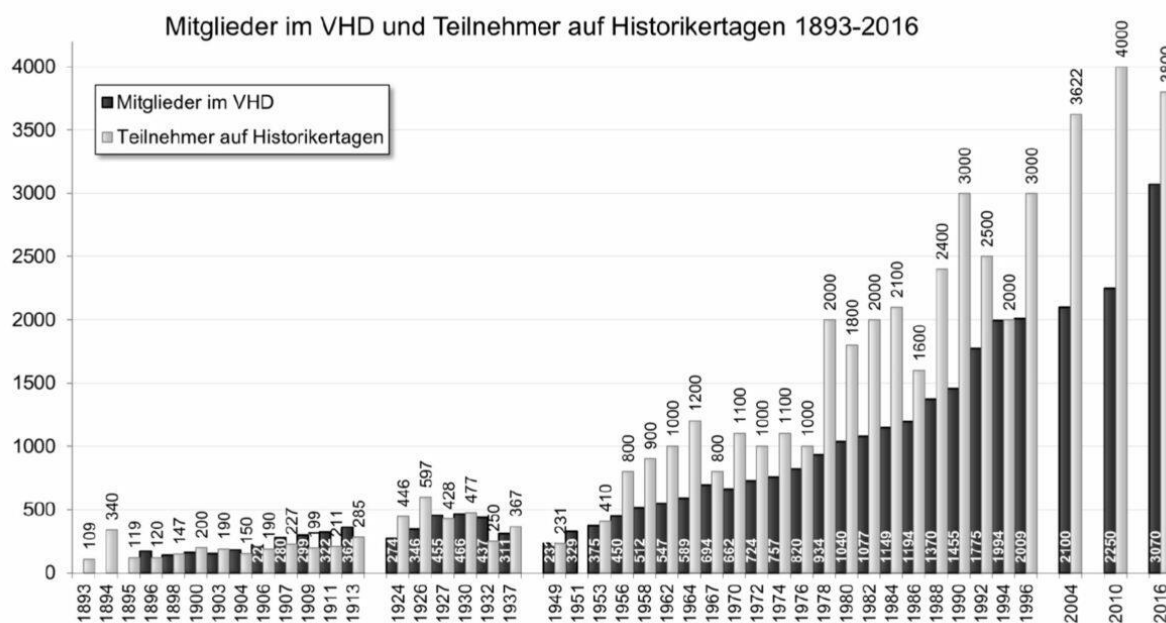
Chairmen and Chairwoman of the VHD from 1949 until today.

The Expansion of the VHD and the *Historikertag*

In the early years of the VHD, most professional historians still knew each other personally. VHD membership grew from an initial 119 to 362 members before the First World War, peaking at 466 during the Weimar Republic, and expanding from the late 1970s to over 3000 members today. Similarly, the number of participants at the *Historikertage* grew from an average of just under 200 before 1914 to 1200 in 1964 in West Berlin.

The “crisis of history” and of the history discipline, which sociology threatened to overtake, led to a twelve-year decline in interest after the Berlin *Historikertag*. Suddenly, however, the number of visitors to the *Historikertag* doubled again in 1978. The lull was over. Due to the high level of public interest in the subject, numbers continued to dramatically climb to as many as 4000 visitors in 2010 in Berlin. In Münster in 2018, visitors could choose from more than 500 lectures. In comparison, during the *Historikertage* in the *Kaiserreich* and the Weimar Republic visitors could

attend eight to twelve lectures that were on offer. In 2021, the first digital *Historikertag* took place due to the pandemic.



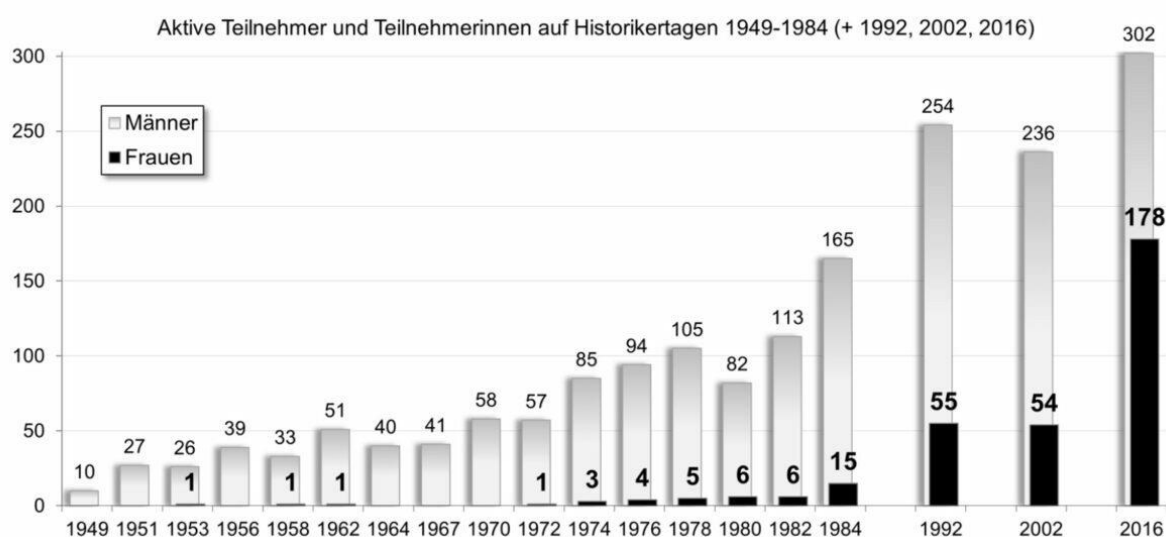
Members in the VHD (black) and participants at the *Historikertage* (grey) from 1893 to 2016.

Internal Effects on the Historical Community

When the association was founded in 1895, the field of history was already sufficiently professionalized with professorships, standards, career rules and the renowned journal *Historische Zeitschrift* (founded in 1859). Compared to the USA, where the discipline was still developing with 15 history professors and the AHA was responsible for the *American Historical Review* as a central specialist journal, the VHD was founded late. It could not determine the development of the discipline, topics researched or how research was conducted. It never acted as a specialised political decision-making body, in contrast to the *Historiker-Gesellschaft*. Nevertheless, the VHD contributed considerably to professionalization because the *Historikertage* offered a public arena for exchange, to which not everyone was admitted. Unpleasant innovations in the opinion of traditional historians, such as the new areas of Social History or *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life) and women's history, were partly inhibited, partly later promoted, new currents were negotiated and trends were set. In this respect, the VHD and the *Historikertage* acted as a catalyst for professional development.

Eventually, the VHD itself became more professional. In the beginning, archivists, librarians, and history teachers were involved in addition to university professors. Since 1900, history teachers were tolerated only as audience members. In 1913, they

separated and formed what is today known as the *Verband der Geschichtslehrerinnen und -lehrer Deutschlands* (Association of German History Teachers, VGD). The first statutes from 1932 defined who was allowed to be a member of the VHD: "Teachers of history and related subjects at universities and schools, members and staff of historical research and teaching institutes, archivists, librarians and museum officials, as well as private individuals who have dedicated a completed academic study or literary work to the field of historical science." History-obsessed generals and other amateurs were therefore banned. In 1946, the *Verband Deutscher Archivare* (Association of German Archivists, VdA) followed the VGD, which had long been separated from the VHD. Since 1949, a seat has been reserved for representatives of VdA and VDG in the committee of the VHD. The connections are close. The meetings of the VGD take place within the framework of the *Historikertage*, manifesting a well-established cooperation.

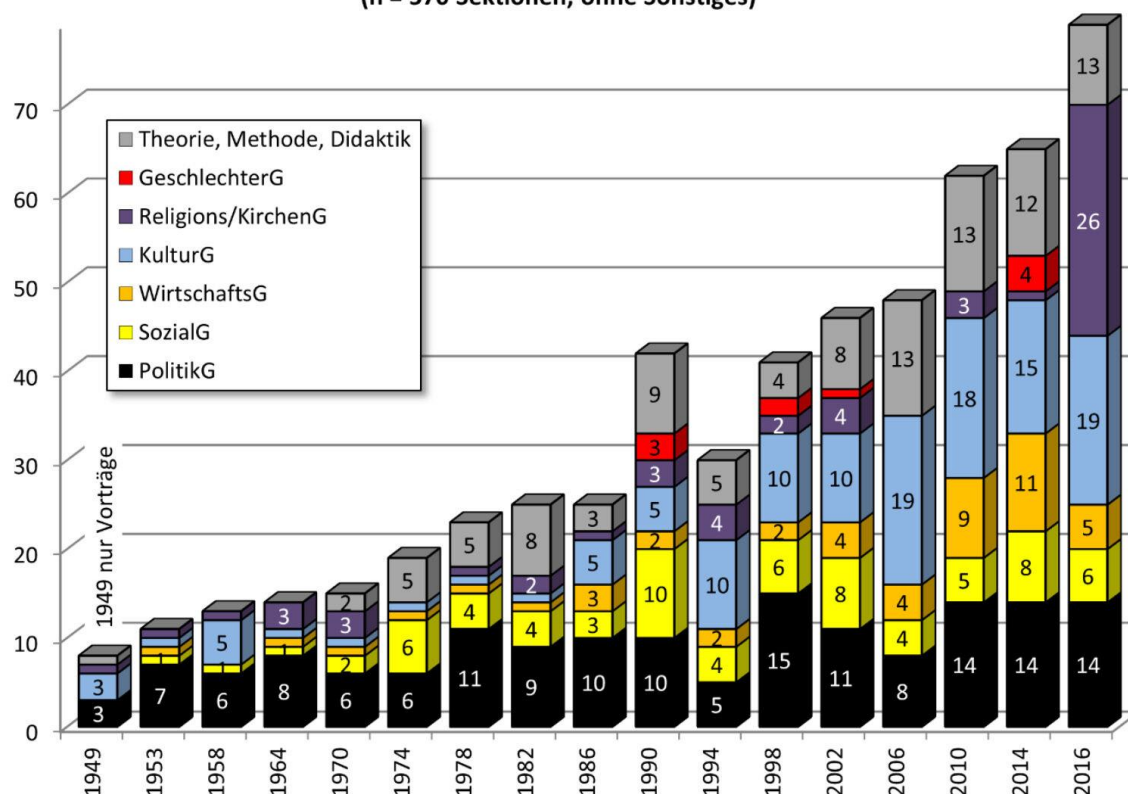


Active participants of the *Historikertage* from 1949 to 1984, plus 1992, 2002 and 2016. Light grey = men, black = women.

The neutralization of the non-academic category of gender is also part of the professional orientation towards objective knowledge-creation processes. In the 1950s, women were permitted to hold a lecture from time to time. Nevertheless, further equality was not achieved until the *Historikertag* in Würzburg in 1980. There, two women were allowed to lead sections for the first time: Irmgard Hantsche on "History in Elementary Schools" and Maria Alföldi on "Social History of the Roman Imperial Period." Even today, men still hold the majority.

Sub-disciplines such as historically-oriented women and gender studies became more visible thanks to the public stage. Until 1970, political history dominated the *Historikertage*, then social history overtook the sections, until the mid-1990s when – starting in the older epochs – cultural history gained ground. The *Historikertage* thus reflected the thematic changes in the discipline and their recognition.

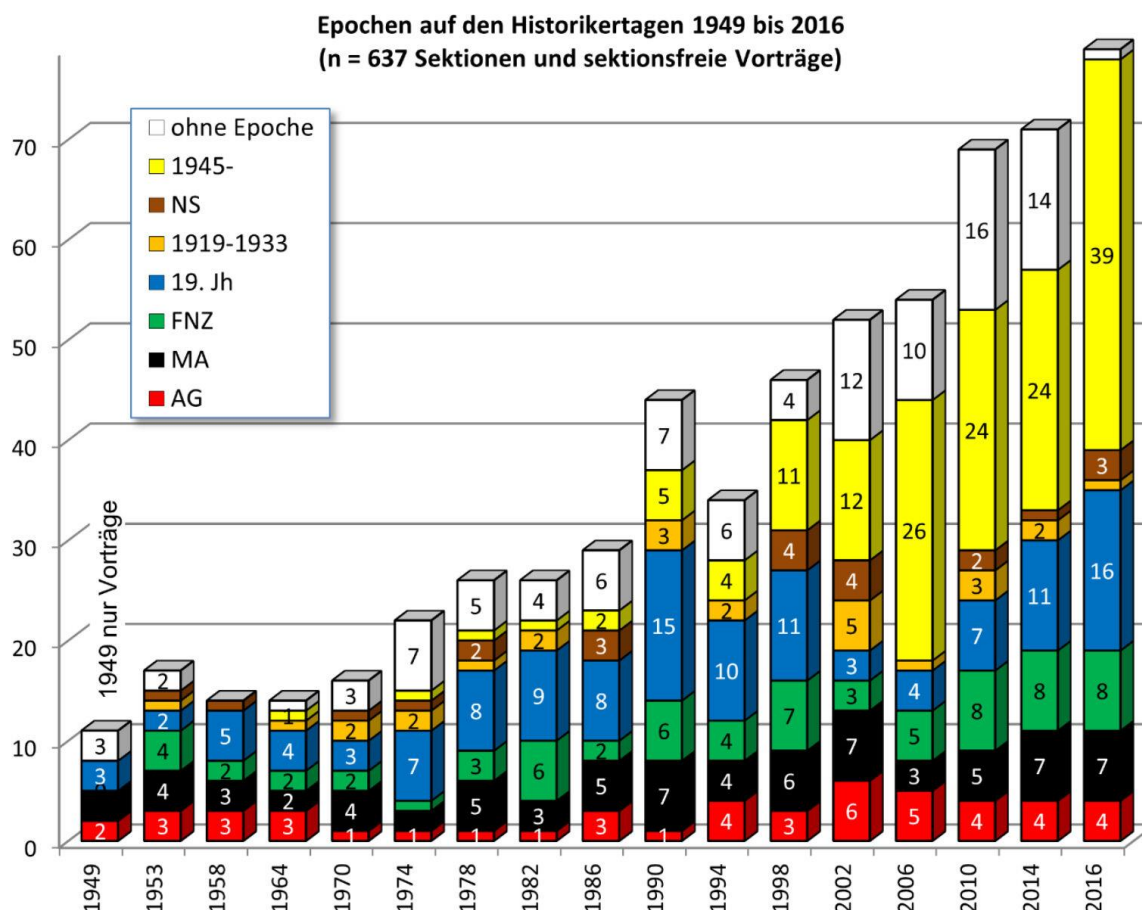
Themen und Ansätze auf Historikertagen 1949-2016
(n = 570 Sektionen, ohne Sonstiges)



Topics and approaches of sections at the Historikertage 1949 to 2016. Grey = theory, methods, didactics, red = gender history, purple = history of religion/church history, light blue = cultural history, orange = economic history, yellow = social history, black = political history.

Until the 1930s, the topic of the Middle Ages dominated the *Historikertage*, before – due to the social history spokesmen – between 1974 and 1990 a hegemony of the 19th century set in, which has since been replaced by contemporary history.

Part of the internal impact on the historical discipline was that renowned professors held important positions. All of these actors were endowed with different social, cultural and symbolic capital. The higher the reputation, the higher the award. Even the section “Young Historians Introduce Themselves” usually featured older private lecturers. It was not until the 1990s that PhD students were increasingly given the opportunity to present their research in the interest of promoting young scholars. Thus, *Historikertage* also reflected and still reflect the reputational hierarchies in the field, be it in the selection of particularly visible lectures or in the visibility of the market-leading publishers. The entrance area at the *Historikertag* is traditionally dominated by premium publishers, while the less esteemed publishers with the less well-known author base hope for scattered visitors at their individual tables on the third floor.



Addressed epochs at the Historikertage from 1949 to 2016. White = no epoch, yellow = 1945 until today, brown = National Socialism, orange = 1919 to 1933, blue = 19th century, green = Early modern period, black = Middle Ages, red = Ancient History.

External Impact

The external impact of the *Historikertage* grew enormously as a reflection of scholarly achievements and as a showcase for the discipline. Thanks to the invitation of dignitaries, German presidents (the first one being Walter Scheel in 1976), and German chancellors (Helmut Schmidt was the first in 1978), and thanks to spectacular discussions such as in 1964 on the question of war guilt in the First World War, in 1984 on *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life), or in 1998 on the supposed brown roots of German social history, the press took an enthusiastic interest in the gatherings.

In this way, the work of historians became visible not only in the field but also to a broader public audience. Nevertheless, the sociability among male and later female colleagues was always an important motive to attend the *Historikertage*, too. The influential *Welt* journalist Paul Sethe confessed after the *Historikertag* in Duisburg in 1962: "The days when the reporter attends historians' congresses are always among the happiest of his professional life."



Historikertage and their Titles since 1893

54th Historikertag Leipzig 2023

Fragile Fakten

(Fragile Facts)

53th Historikertag München 2021 (digital)

Deutungskämpfe

(Battles of Interpretation)

52th Historikertag Münster 2018

Gespaltene Gesellschaften

(Divided Societies)

51st Historikertag Hamburg 2016

Glaubensfragen

(Questions of Belief)

50th Historikertag Göttingen 2014

Gewinner und Verlierer

(Winners and Losers)

49th Historikertag Mainz 2012

Ressourcen – Konflikte

(Resources – Conflicts)

48th Historikertag Berlin 2010

47th Historikertag Dresden 2008

Ungleichheiten

(Inequalities)

46th Historikertag Konstanz 2006

Geschichtsbilder

(HistoryImages)

45th Historikertag Kiel 2004

Kommunikation und Raum

(Communication and Space)

44th Historikertag Halle/ Saale 2002

Traditionen – Visionen

(Traditions – Visions)

43th Historikertag Aachen 2000

Eine Welt – eine Geschichte?

(One World - One History?)

42th Historikertag Frankfurt/Main 1998

Intentionen – Wirklichkeiten

(Intentions – Realities)

41st Historikertag München 1996

Geschichte als Argument

(History as Argument)

40th Historikertag Leipzig 1994

Lebenswelt und Wissenschaft

(*Lebenswelt* [reality] and Science)

39th Historikertag Hannover 1992

Europa – Einheit und Vielheit

(Europe - Unity and Plurality)

38th Historikertag Bochum 1990

Identitäten in der Geschichte

(Identities in History)

37th Historikertag Bamberg 1988

36th Historikertag Trier 1986

Räume der Geschichte –

Geschichte des Raums

(Spaces of History – History of Space)

35th Historikertag Berlin 1984

34th Historikertag Münster 1982

33th Historikertag Würzburg 1980

32th Historikertag Hamburg 1978

31st Historikertag Mannheim 1976

30th Historikertag Braunschweig 1974

29th Historikertag Regensburg 1972

28th Historikertag Köln 1970

27th Historikertag Freiburg/Breisgau 1967

26th Historikertag West Berlin 1964

25th Historikertag Duisburg 1962

24th Historikertag Trier 1958



- 23th Historikertag Ulm 1956
- 22th Historikertag Bremen 1953
- 21st Historikertag Marburg 1951
- 20th Historikertag München 1949
- 19th Historikertag Erfurt 1937
- 18th Historikertag Göttingen 1932
- 17th Historikertag Halle/Saale 1930
- 16th Historikertag Graz 1927
- 15th Historikertag Breslau/Wroctaw 1926
- 14th Historikertag Frankfurt/Main 1924
- 13th Historikertag Wien 1913
- 12th Historikertag Braunschweig 1911
- 11th Historikertag Straßburg 1909
- 10th Historikertag Dresden 1907
- 9th Historikertag Stuttgart 1906
- 8th Historikertag Salzburg 1904
- 7th Historikertag Heidelberg 1903
- 6th Historikertag Halle/Saale 1900
- 5th Historikertag Nürnberg 1898
- 4th Historikertag Innsbruck 1896
- 3th Historikertag Frankfurt/Main 1895
- 2th Historikertag Leipzig 1894
- 1st Historikertag München 1893