

**Ricerche di storia politica-Internetseite**  
**Interview**  
**Prof. Dr. Marcus Payk**  
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- 1) What changes – if any – are occurring in teaching (method, tools, subjects) and in the popularization of history in the German universities?**

*Like in most nations around the world, the ways of learning about history have become much more diverse in Germany in the recent decade. The major change comes from the challenges of the digital age, especially from the abundance of historical information on the Internet and the new structures of distributing and retrieving knowledge. The rapid digitization of all kinds of materials, from textbooks to archival sources, requires re-thinking the standard approaches. When articles on Wikipedia etc. reach an audience of millions, reflections on their mode of presenting history are inevitable. Generally speaking, most historians in Germany could agree that there are more opportunities than threats to their profession by this change, at least with online courses (MOOC) remaining a marginal phenomenon in German humanities. Networks and electronic communication platforms like H-Soz-u-Kult (an off-spring of the H-Net) are crucial not only for the community of historians but can serve to popularize research to a wide array of users. There are even specialized websites like [www.einestages.de](http://www.einestages.de) which invite individuals to contribute by sending in historical photos and articles. Also, the digital age increasingly becomes a subject of historical research itself, with fresh projects starting to look at the rise of an information society from the 1970s onward.*

- 2) «Storici in pubblico» - one of the on-line columns edited by the *Associazione Ricerche di Storia politica* – gathers the recommendations of articles published by scholars and researchers on the daily and periodical press, web sites, blogs, etc. What do you think of the participation of historians in the civil, social and political debate by means of arguments taken by historical studies? According to you, does «popularization» prevail on what in Italy is usually called «public us of history»?**

*History has a strong standing in German public interest, even though the main attention focuses almost exclusively on contemporary history. This interest encourages academic historians to participate in public debates. Quite some professors of history are well-known from regular presence in the media. Only a minority, however, engages in political debates that go beyond historical topics in a more narrow sense. Most historians in Germany would be rather hesitant to draw premature parallels between the past and present as politicians regularly do. On the more analytical side, the sphere between academic history and popular interest is gradually understood as a distinct field of its own, termed “public history” and comprising unique features in both teaching and researching.*

- 3) **One of the ways through which history can aim at widening its audience is to intertwine its analysis with the one of the social sciences (from anthropology to sociology, from demography to psychology). Through which research paths do you consider possible to make the dialogue between these two disciplines ever more effective? And how do the German academic institutions face this new challenge?**

*Interdisciplinary research has been a long-standing, yet rarely implemented, demand in both the scientific community and the German academia in general. Recent decades have already seen promising efforts to expand and enhance the writing of history through methods and perspectives taken from other disciplines, ranging from social history to the history of emotions. I would be reluctant, however, to argue that these interdisciplinary efforts usually catch the attention of a broad audience. Even in the respective disciplines, only a minority is interested in working beyond the boundaries of the established disciplines.*

- 4) **The end of the cold war and the reunification of Germany have been the most important events in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In which way these two events have effected historical writing among professional historians and the popularization of history?**

*The end of the Cold War has had major effects on the historical profession in Germany. After 1989/1990, four decades of post-war development were suddenly allotted from present-day reality to history. While large parts of the established GDR historiography were suspended due to ideological entanglements with the ruling party, general and professional interest in German History post-1945 surged in the early 1990s. While some early accounts must be seen as "Cold War Triumphalism", contrasting the failure of the GDR with the "success story" of the Federal Republic, the vast majority of historical research offered more nuanced insights. Comparing the two German states after 1949 or both German dictatorships in the 20th century has become a more accepted way of understanding the trajectories of modern German history. This stands in remarkable contrast to popular understandings where comparisons of this kind, in particular the alleged equation of the Nazi dictatorship and the GDR, are still very much contested.*

- 5) **Germany was ruled by two different dictatorships in 20<sup>th</sup> century. In your opinion in which way public opinion has elaborated their memory and in which way we can speak of a successful *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*?**

*It is hard to speak of "success" when it comes to the "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" of Germany after 1945 or 1989 respectively. Against what standards or norms the changing modes of remembering the German dictatorships would have to be measured against? Could there be a definite conclusion or end of commemoration? The general public still, and maybe more than ever, abhors the Nazi regime (and to a much lesser extent the socialist regime of the GDR). Yet, it is an open question how this interest will develop in the coming decades. It might wither away with the last contemporary witnesses, even though many voices assume that some kind of ahistorical ritualization of the peculiarities of the German "Vergangenheit" might take place.*