

Letter from the Editor

Having to attend the annual meetings of the German Studies Association (GSA) and the American Historical Association (AHA) is one of the most gratifying tasks of serving as editor of this journal, for it is there that I have the opportunity to visit as many panels on as many different themes and time periods as possible in search of new and innovative work that might be of interest to the readers of *CEH*. It was in this capacity (as incoming editor) at the 2013 meeting of the GSA in Denver that I first heard Benjamin Carter Hett present his controversial findings on the infamous Reichstag fire of February 1933, a pivotal event in the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship. In brief, Hett cast doubt on the orthodox consensus that a lone culprit—the Dutch communist Marinus van der Lubbe—had been responsible for the fire; in fact, he argued, it was the Nazis themselves who had set the German parliament building aflame, an argument he has since developed at length in *Burning the Reichstag: An Investigation into the Third Reich's Enduring Mystery* (2014).

I approached Hett immediately after his talk and told him that I found his arguments persuasive—but that I was not sure it really mattered much who had started the fire. After all, regardless of its actual authorship, the political consequences were the same: the fire served as a pretext for the broad suspension of civil liberties across Germany. During the course of our conversation, I suggested that the burning question was not necessarily the authorship per se, but rather why the postwar debate about “whodunit” has been so intense—and what that says about the historical profession and especially the way in which its members have engaged in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* since 1945.

Hett's book has been the subject of considerable controversy since its appearance, which only confirms the suspicion that the debate about the authorship of the fire is a proxy war for other essential issues. And it is those very issues that Hett—using new documents that he has come across since publishing his book—addresses in the article that appears in this issue of *CEH* (“**This Story Is about Something Fundamental: Nazi Criminals, History, Memory, and the Reichstag Fire**”). The controversy about the fire, he argues, “tells us about the subterranean forces, especially of legal and political interest, that have shaped the master narrative; and it tells us about our attitudes toward different kinds of sources and authors”—especially the tendency of some historians to question the reliability of so-called victims' narratives as valid historical sources about the events of the 1930s and 1940s. One might add that it also tells us a great deal about the role that personal and professional allegiances play in the historical *Zunft* when it comes to the “production of knowledge.”

At the same GSA meeting in Denver, David Blackbourn delivered a luncheon address in which he lamented what he sees as a regrettable development in the profession: the overwhelming focus on the post-1945 period—at the expense of work on earlier periods. Intrigued by Blackbourn's findings, I decided, as the new editor, to “take stock” of *CEH* over the past four and a half decades, especially with an eye to the ways in which the content of the journal has changed since the political *Wende* of 1989–1990. I discussed my findings at the 2014 meeting of the GSA, and present in this issue a revised and expanded version of that paper (“**Central European History since 1989: Historiographical Trends and Post-Wende ‘Turns’**”). There has clearly been a discernible shift in thematic emphases and methodological approaches over the past two and half decades, a result of factors that are internal and external to the discipline. One of the more striking changes is a marked decline in the number of articles about certain themes that had earlier been much more popular—such as the Bismarck era.

One might expect the dramatic events of 1989–1990 to have prompted greater interest in “old-fashioned” questions about high politics and diplomacy, as well as the first German unification. It has not, which is why James Stone’s investigation in this issue of Bismarck’s behind-the-scenes diplomacy in Central Asia is especially welcome (**“Bismarck and the Great Game: Germany and Anglo-Russian Rivalry in Central Asia, 1871–1890”**). Looking at the ways in which the Iron Chancellor tried to stoke conflict between Britain and Russia in that distant region, Stone carefully documents Bismarck’s instrumental use of the Great Game—the strategic competition between those two rival Great Powers in Central Asia—to further Germany’s own interests and security in Europe proper. Speaking to an ongoing debate about the nature of Bismarck’s diplomacy after unification, the article suggests that the chancellor’s image after the 1878 Congress of Berlin—as an “honest broker” desirous of peace and stability—is in need of revision. In fact, Stone argues, Bismarck’s tireless efforts to keep the British and Russians at loggerheads in the steppes of Central Asia demonstrate instead just how hard he worked to foment international instability—to Germany’s own advantage, of course.

If Stone’s study of Bismarck’s international intrigues represents a fine specimen of the type of “old-fashioned” diplomatic history seen less frequently on the pages of *CEH* over the last two decades, Katherine B. Aaslestad’s review essay of recent literature marking the 200th anniversary of the Congress of Vienna reminds us of some of the ways the study of high politics and diplomacy has evolved in recent decades (**“Serious Work for a New Europe: The Congress of Vienna after Two Hundred Years”**). With greater sensibility to the role that public opinion, civil society, and political culture played in the diplomatic proceedings that took place in the Habsburg capital, the new studies, as a whole, question the conventional portrayal of the post-Napoleonic settlement as a reactionary Restoration of the status quo ante. Offering a more nuanced (and less anachronistic) understanding of political ideology—especially of early nineteenth-century nationalism—the new publications, Aaslestad argues, focus on important aspects of the settlement that earlier studies neglected; this includes the attention paid by the heads of state and diplomats who converged upon Vienna to humanitarian concerns, religious politics, as well as popular national and constitutional strivings.

The remaining article in this issue—Martina Steer’s **“Nation, Religion, Gender: The Triple Challenge of Middle-Class German-Jewish Women in World War I”**—also investigates a theme that has not received much attention in the existing scholarly literature: the experiences of middle-class Jewish women in Germany during World War I and the consequences that those experiences had for their behavior during the Weimar Republic. Like their male counterparts, many of these women greeted the war as an opportunity to shed any residual status as “foreign elements” and become more integrated into German society. Instead, the early *Burgfriede* (“civic truce”) proclaimed by Kaiser Wilhelm at the start of the war gave way to increased incidences of antisemitism, which, in turn, made it increasingly difficult for these women to “square the circle of competing allegiances”—to the German nation, to their Jewish identity, and to feminism. This brought in its wake a reorientation on the part of many middle-class German-Jewish women, who, after the war, remained strongly attached to Germany, but, at the same time, expended their energies to a much greater extent on the cultivation of a greater sense of Jewish community. In a sense, then, even before the rise of National Socialism, Steer suggests, many felt a growing sense of distance from the rest of German society—one that was strongly intimated from without and reluctantly internalized from within.

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