

**Round Table: Young Historians in Europe today –
Chances, Problems, Politics
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Historians should be taken seriously and be allowed to say something – even if politics makes it hard to have your voice heard.

At ISHA workshops, discussions about history pertaining to the role of historians in society and what it means to work in this profession often arise only during pub-crawl debates. This year we decided to give the discourse an official structure in the form of a round table. Around forty people attended, and the Stiftung Aufarbeitung was kind enough to provide us with the locality on the evening of 21st September 2016. Our intention was to lead the discussion focusing on three main topics: the study situation in each of the member’s section, the job opportunities that are available for historians and their possibilities to influence society and politics. Although the discussion did not quite develop along the lines we had intended, it was very conducive.

The first topic that emerged was that of digitalization of historical sources and academic literature. The consensus was that widespread digitalization was a step in the right direction towards modernizing our subject of study, allowing access to data previously not available: “Digitalize the hell out of any document you find!”, as one participant put it. Many, however, criticized that digitalized sources and their usage had in many cases not or only perfunctorily been integrated into their curriculum. On the one hand, the increasing importance of digitalization “levels the playing field”, since everyone generally has access to data regardless of their geographical location. On the other hand, digital paywalls and access restrictions create new inequalities and exclude students from current developments and trends in historiography. One could add that the large funding of digitalization efforts in Anglophone countries leads to an overreliance on English sources. Digitalized sources remain unused if one is not taught the skills to properly utilize them.

Following that premise, the discussion dovetailed into the question of what a university should provide for its students, a set of broad or narrow research skills or a more fact-based approach to the subject.

Especially students from Eastern European universities criticized the heavy emphasis on a fact-based chronological study of history along the lines of nation states, often their own. At the same time, they are still expected to write research papers “without anyone teaching us

how to do so”, one participant pointed out. Nonetheless, in a classic case of “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”, some students of Western European universities were impressed by the breadth and depth of historical knowledge displayed by students from Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time they criticized that their own programs often failed to provide fact-based overviews of historical subjects. While the knowledge of facts is a definite part of being a historian, research skills are also important so that well-founded opinions on historical questions can be formed.

This of course can only take place in a free and unrestricted research environment which, however, is not the case anymore in many countries where governments are trying to enforce their own interpretation of the (national) past and suppress and censor dissenting voices. “It can be dangerous to have certain opinions on modern history, the period of Solidarność is now a dead [research] field.”, one Polish participant noted. Others remarked that the wish for a historiography isolated from politics was an illusion as “historians are always feeding political opinions and using them”, stated Ulrich Mähler, who hosted the discussion on behalf of the Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung. Furthermore, it was agreed upon that development in certain countries goes far beyond the “healthy” influence of politics on history and poses a threat to any true and professional historical research. History should always be able to provide for multiple perspectives, and in our times, it is important that ISHA is a place which fosters such discussions.

The question of job opportunities was probably the least controversial, since finding a job with a liberal arts degree seems to be universally difficult. In general, many were optimistic concerning the job opportunities for history students. Students from Anglophone countries pointed out that undergraduate degrees in history were often seen as a stepping stone to graduate studies in fields other than history. Nonetheless, many took this as an opportunity to argue that the specific skills of historians should enable them to be an important voice that is heard in society.

Although a large breadth of opinions were voiced during the discussion, what unites us is that we take our profession seriously and we believe that our universities and politicians allow us to do good for society. History never happens in a vacuum, and it can be beneficial to articulate concerns and worries about the context in which historical research takes place. Even if the debate felt like “a group therapy session”, as one participant pointed out, it was definitely a successful and enjoyable one which we hope to repeat in the future.