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Richard Bessel:

*The German Historical Institute London and British Research on German History*

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## ***THE GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON AND BRITISH RESEARCH ON GERMAN HISTORY***

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In 1998 the then Director of the German Historical Institute London, Peter Wende, described Francis Carsten, who died in June of that year, as ‘the doyen of British historians working on Germany’.<sup>1</sup> Carsten, whose photograph can be found (along with some of the books he donated to the Institute) in a glass cabinet in its Library, had been one of the founding fathers of the London Institute when it was established in 1975 under its first Director, Paul Kluge. Peter Wende’s description was fitting in so many respects: like many ‘British historians working on Germany’, Francis Carsten was born outside of Britain (in his case, in Berlin); his work, from his earlier publications on early modern Prussia to his later books on twentieth-century Germany, challenged orthodoxies then prevailing among historians in Germany and made a substantial impact on our understanding of German history; and he became a stalwart supporter and beneficiary of the German Historical Institute, then located on Russell Square.

The example of Francis Carsten is illustrative of the relationship of the London Institute with historians in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Many ‘British historians working on Germany’, like Francis Carsten, have come from outside the British Isles—including, the current Regius Professors of History at both Oxford and Cambridge, Lyndal Roper and Christopher Clark respectively, both of whom serve as members of the *Beirat* of the London Institute. Other British historians of Germany, who challenged the then accepted ways in which the history of Germany was understood—one thinks of David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley (both now in the United States)—found a ready platform at the London Institute. For decades, new approaches to German history were developed in the United Kingdom, and the German Historical Institute London has offered a powerful forum and catalyst for these approaches.

<sup>1</sup> Peter Wende, ‘Francis L. Carsten, 1911–1998’, *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*, 22/2 (Nov. 1998), 124.

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The late 1970s and early 1980s were a turning point. This resulted from the fortunate and productive juxtaposition of the coming of (academic) age of a (then) young generation of historians of Germany, born after the Second World War and having profited from the expansion of the British university system in the 1960s, and the arrival at the recently established London Institute of Wolfgang Mommsen as its Director. Mommsen put the Institute on the map in an emphatic manner. He brought to London young German historians keen to challenge accepted approaches and to make common cause with colleagues in Britain, and who later became prominent figures in German history departments. And he sponsored events that proved to be historiographical milestones. One such was the conference on the 'Social History of the Reformation' held in London in May 1978. In his report on the conference, Thomas Brady began by observing that 'not so long ago the idea of an Anglo-German conference on the social history of the Reformation would have been thought a pipe-dream'.<sup>2</sup> Advised by the former Director of the Institute of Historical Research in London A. G. Dickens, and bringing together British, German, American, Irish, Swiss, and Austrian participants, Mommsen seized the opportunity to shape new understandings of early modern Germany.

A year later the London Institute organized the famous Cumberland Lodge conference on the 'Structure and Politics of the Third Reich'.<sup>3</sup> The sharp debates at that time, with Tim Mason (the author of the terms 'structuralist' and 'intentionalist' that surfaced at the conference) and Hans Mommsen on one side and Karl-Dietrich Bracher and Klaus Hildebrandt on the other, framed discussion of the National Socialist dictatorship for years.<sup>4</sup> Some three decades

<sup>2</sup> Thomas A. Brady, Jr., "'Social History of the Reformation", "Sozialgeschichte der Reformation": A Conference at the Deutsches Historisches Institut London, May 25-27, 1978', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 10/1 (Spring 1979), 89-92, at 89.

<sup>3</sup> See the book that resulted from the conference: Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker (eds.), *Der 'Führerstaat'. Mythos und Realität: Studien zur Struktur und Politik des Dritten Reiches = The 'Führer State'. Myth and Reality: Studies on the Structure and Politics of the Third Reich* (Stuttgart, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Bessel, 'Functionalists versus Intentionalists: The Debate Twenty Years On or Whatever Happened to Functionalism and Intentionalism?', *German Studies Review*, 26/1 (2003), 15-20.

later the discussion was taken up anew, when the Institute held its conference on 'German Society in the Nazi Era', at which some veterans of 1979 (including Jane Caplan and Ian Kershaw) were present and which took up current debates on the meanings of the *Volks-gemeinschaft* for understanding the 'Third Reich'.<sup>5</sup> By 2010 the historiographical landscape had shifted, away from the more class-based and structural interpretations that had held sway in 1979 towards a more cultural focus and one that put the murder of Europe's Jewish population at its centre. What had not shifted, however, was the importance of events organized by the German Historical Institute London.

The importance of the London Institute for British colleagues has not been limited to facilitating links among established scholars and offering opportunities for British colleagues (including this author) to organize conferences drawing participants from across Europe and indeed from around the world. From Wolfgang Mommsen's participation in the conferences on German social history organized by Richard Evans at the University of East Anglia in the late 1970s to more recent programmes designed to help aspiring young scholars, the Institute has played a vital role in promoting the research of younger colleagues. The Institute's Postgraduate Students Conferences give postgraduate research students in the UK and Ireland working on German history an opportunity to present their work-in-progress, and to discuss it with other students working in the same or similar fields—a programme that is now entering its third decade. For medievalists, the Institute joined with its sister institution in Washington beginning in 2005 to bring together British, American, and German Ph.D. students and recent Ph.D. recipients. The Institute's annual Workshops in Early Modern German History, organized with the UK's German History Society, have an even longer history: starting in 2002, they have established themselves as the principal forum for cross-disciplinary discussion of new research on early modern German-speaking Central Europe.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the Institute's activities have extended ever more beyond the UK and Germany, offering historians working in the British Isles increased opportunities to develop transnational perspectives. During his term as the Institute's

<sup>5</sup> See Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto (eds.), *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany: Social Engineering and Private Lives* (Oxford, 2014).

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Director, Hagen Schulze gave its activities an increasingly pan-European focus, perhaps best characterized by another milestone conference at Cumberland Lodge, on 'European *Lieux de Mémoire*' held in 2002. In more recent years, and particularly since the arrival of its current Director, Andreas Gestrich, in 2006, the London Institute has extended the scope of its activities far beyond Europe. Transnational approaches are now all the rage, and the Institute sees the history of the British Empire and Commonwealth, colonialism and the colonies, as a central research focus, and recently has stretched its institutional reach to India. Not only has the Institute become a magnet for German scholars working in this area and profiting from access to the archival resources available in and around London and collaboration with British colleagues; it has also become a forum for British scholars whose interests extend far beyond German history. Many of the subjects of conferences organized by the Institute in recent years reveal this broader, global focus, from the 2006 conference on 'Removing Peoples: Forced Migration in the Modern World' to the more recent gathering on 'Remembering (Post)Colonial Violence: Silence, Suffering, and Reconciliation' held in 2014.

Today, half a century after its establishment, the German Historical Institute London remains a vital resource for historians of Germany working in the UK and Ireland, and a vital link with German colleagues—in order to explore the history not just of German-speaking Europe but, increasingly, of the world.

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