

PUBLIC HISTORY AS A UNIVERSITY DISCIPLINE: ITS BACKGROUND, CONTENT AND VALUE

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ABSTRACT

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Public history as a university discipline has expanded exponentially, especially in the United States, ever since its inception in the 1970s. Only in the last three decades, however, has it slowly but surely become an international phenomenon, albeit with structural modifications. Not every university offers a public history major, but it does exist as an area of concentration in many, more general bachelor's and master's programs. Apart from these numerous courses, there has been a surge of national and international associations, journals and conferences dealing with issues of public history as a field of research and an academic subject. Their focus, content-wise, is on the presentation of history to a broader, non-specialist public. In Germany, specifically the degree program at the Freie Universität Berlin (FU) presented in this essay, instruction is based on two pillars: practical exercises in the design and implementation of public history products, and specialized seminars on the development and application of theoretical models of analysis developed by the participants themselves. Apart from being taught historical and didactic methods, students will discuss questions of historical learning. The public history major at the Freie Universität is unique in its being a full Master of Arts program as well as in its cooperation with numerous places and institutions of public history in Greater Berlin and beyond. These include museums, memorial sites, publishing houses, media agencies and even government ministries, and entail the joint implementation of practical projects and seminars. Some outstanding examples will be highlighted following a brief introduction to the underlying idea and structure of the degree program.

Keywords: Public history; contemporary history; Germany; history education; master's program

1. INTRODUCTION

Public history as a university discipline has expanded worldwide, slowly but surely, ever since its inception in the United States back in the 1970s. Apart from numerous degree programs, there is an international association (International Federation for Public History, <https://ifph.hypotheses.org/>), an international journal (*International Public History*), and since 2014 an annual international conference hosted by the federation that offers participants the opportunity, among other things, to exchange experiences of

university teaching in the field of public history (Noiret and Cauvin, 2017). The first international public history conference actually took place in 2005 at Ruskin College in Oxford, but was devoted more to public representations of history in various countries than to questions of university instruction, and unfortunately did not lead to any regular or lasting exchanges (Ashton and Kean, 2009). Alongside the relatively recent journal *International Public History*, which first appeared in 2018, the academic journal *The Public Historian*, founded in 1978 in the United States, is the main global discussion forum.

An even greater number of public history degree programs have been established in Europe since the 2000s, but still nowhere near the approximately two hundred programs existing in the United States (an overview of the public history majors in different countries is provided by Ashton and Trapeznik, 2019). The first public history master's program in Germany was set up in 2008 at the Freie Universität Berlin in cooperation with the Leibniz Center for Contemporary History Potsdam. Only two other programs have followed to date (Zumhof, 2020: 23). Moreover, many history departments have included a public history concentration in their general master's program. All degree programs and concentrations share a focus on the public presentation of history, the practical application of history, and in many cases on historical learning. The following will present the structure and content of the master's program at the Freie Universität Berlin, as well as a critical assessment of its transferability to the programs in other countries.

2. IDEA

The idea behind the public history concentration or major is that there is a vast working field for historians outside of universities and schools, and that students of history should be prepared for this - better and more specifically than it has been the case in existing history departments. The working areas for historians greatly expanded in the wake of the so-called history boom of the 1980s, when attempts were made to accommodate the growing public interest in history by presenting it in the form of exhibits, films, documentaries, magazines or books. The heightened public interest was not only centered on the consumption of history-related activities, however, but also on their production. Regional history workshops were created in which, true to the motto "dig where you stand" (Lindqvist, 1979), hobby and trained historians with no university affiliation researched social, economic and everyday history at the local level and endeavored to convey this history to the public. This expansion of subject areas was linked to an expansion of sources and methods. New sources included ego documents such as diaries, private letters and photos as well as oral histories. The activities of these history workshops were seen as history "from below," as a conscious counterpoint to academic history, which was accused of having lost touch with the public and of only publishing for a specialist audience.

An offshoot of these history workshops was the public history movement in the United States, which aimed to counteract the isolation of university-based historians, calling on them to put their skills to use in developing popular historical narratives and to adapt university curricula to reflect this shift in working areas. Historian Denise D. Meringolo dates the beginnings of professional public history to the late nineteenth century, though mostly with reference to the exceptional case of the National Park Service in the United States, which began to employ historians around this time. She barely addresses university instruction, which is why her approach is not particularly relevant here (Meringolo, 2012). The idea of training historians for specific practical tasks resulted in the creation of corresponding degree programs in the United States (Sayer, 2019). It had little influence on the general study of history at institutions of higher education. The history-workshop approach with its expanded areas of research and source materials did, however, work its way into the general practice of historiography and is now an indispensable part of any history degree, public history included.

Both developments, the history boom and the history-workshop movement, have had a strong impact on the development of public history degree programs and specializations in Germany. Expanding the definition formulated in the 1990s in the United States, which describes public history in very general terms as "history for the public, about the public, and by the public" (Charles, 1994), public history is understood here as follows. "Public history on the one hand comprises every form of public representation of history that is aimed at a broad, non-specialist public with no historical training while on the other hand entailing the historical investigation of the same" (Zündorf, 2017). This perspective underscores not only the public aspect of public history as well as the people involved in its creation and consumption, but also its more scholarly aspect, as a subject of research in its own right.

3. CONCEPT OF THE BERLIN PUBLIC HISTORY MAJOR

Building on this, university instruction in public history at the Freie Universität is founded on two pillars: practical exercises in the conception and implementation of public-history products, and specialized seminars on the development and application of theoretical models of analysis developed by the participants themselves. In different study programs, students learn to reflect on the aesthetic, political and commercial dimensions of history and are given deeper insight into practical fields of history. Students should gain knowledge about how historical culture works but also historical learning. To carry out these challenging tasks, students must be introduced to the methods and tools for analyzing sources and objects such as the written word, images, film, websites, etc. There is likewise an emphasis on the theory of communicating history.

This means a lot of theory, whereas most students are keen on practice. To this end we offer practical workshops to strengthen skills such as presentation techniques and team work or more specialized ones on curating analogue or virtual exhibitions, writing for a non-academic audience and planning cultural projects. However, we do not offer specialized seminars on, for example, camera work or website programming. The instructors are normally historians who work in the field of historical culture outside a university context and can thus offer an inside look at their work. Moreover, students are required to do an internship in the field of historical culture.

Classes are taught by university-affiliated historians as well as by historians who work outside of an academic or other institutional context. This is to ensure that historical sources are not just analyzed in terms of their relevance to research work but also with a view to their potential role in communicating history to the broader public. The guiding questions of analysis concern the various conceptions of history and the historical narratives conveyed in these presentations, their mode of operation and their integration in historical culture. There is also a focus on the individuals involved in public history. A good example of one possible analytical approach is offered by Jerome de Groot in his analysis of popular culture in Britain (de Groot, 2009). The aim is therefore an evaluation and classification of history presented to the public. This requires a breakdown into different categories as well as according to the quality of content and the mode of communication. A market analysis correlates supply and demand, resulting in a kind of target-actual comparison that investigates public expectations by target group and the fulfilment of these expectations. It also asks which aspects of public history are currently being addressed and which are still in demand. Finally, there is the question of if and to what extent public history should be the work of actual historians.

There are certainly limits to what academic historians are willing to do to accommodate public interests, at which point other suppliers can be called in to assist. The greater the fictional elements in historical representations, the lesser academic historians are needed. This is the case for feature films or historical novels, which sometimes involve trained historians in their production but are largely produced by suppliers in other branches, given that these projects don't meet scholarly standards. The question therefore arises whether public history should follow the same rigorous standards of historiography if both university-employed historians and those outside of academia are active in communicating history. Finally, a minimum consensus must be reached about the limits of treating "historical products" as such, determining at which point they become mere fictional products. The National Council on Public History in the United States has published a code of ethics to this effect:

- 1. Public historians should serve as advocates for the preservation, care, and accessibility of historical records and resources of all kinds, including intangible cultural resources.*
- 2. Public historians should carry out historical research and present historical evidence with integrity.*
- 3. Public historians should strive to be culturally inclusive in the practice of history and in the presentation of history.*
- 4. Public historians should be fully cognizant of the purpose or purposes for which their work is intended, recognizing that research-based decisions and actions may have long-term consequences.*
- 5. Public historians should maintain a conscious regard for the interpersonal dynamics inherent in historical practice."*

(NCPH, 2007)

Public historians are thus called upon to protect material and immaterial remains as well as to present history in a serious yet accessible manner. They should conduct their work mindfully and with a sense of social responsibility. Students of the degree program will discuss an additional set of standards briefly outlined below.

4. STANDARDS OF PUBLIC HISTORY

A discussion of historiographical standards and in particular their application to public history is part of every seminar and especially the practical exercises. The standards to be upheld include, first of all, scholarly independence, unrestricted access to sources, and the unhindered publication of results. Also important is the careful, transparent and impartial handling of sources as well as naming the authors. Transparency in this context means that the sources and the literature used are cited, but also that the objective of the work is explained and that the authors and possible sponsors or clients are enumerated. It is likewise important to contextualize history and not view it in isolation, while acknowledging in the spirit of multiperspectivity that this history is a construct (Lücke and Zündorf, 2018: 37-45).

We have also formulated some standards for historical presentations intended for the public. One of these concerns **narrativity**, i.e., the linking of the past to the present through language. A further element is personification. This means integrating the everyday perspectives of men and women from the society under consideration - in contrast to the personalization of history through famous individuals who supposedly steered historical development. Personification is meant to introduce into historical narratives the more everyday aspects of life, the hopes and experiences of our ancestors. This is closely linked to the abovementioned concept of **multiperspectivity**. Accordingly, every historical account should make clear that it is a subjective perception of historical reality and not historical reality itself, or rather that there are multiple perspectives on the past that can sometimes contradict each other and give rise to controversies. Moreover, a proven principle of historical and political education in Germany has been adopted by public history, namely, that controversies over historical narratives should not only be permitted but actively encouraged. Historical narratives should not be presented as the sole and overwhelming truth (Lücke et al., 2016: 41-52).

Considerations of **historical imagination**, i.e., the images we have of the past, are also relevant to public history, as the products of public history have to be compatible with the historical imagination of the public - because how else is an acceptable or commercially viable product supposed to be brought in line with the viewing habits (literally the habitual ways of seeing) of its recipients? The task of a critical public history, or so we attempt to show in our degree program, is to create an awareness of the imaginative character of history and to discuss with our students whether or not such mental images can be revised or modified (Brauer and Lücke, 2020).

Following one textbook introduction to public history from the United States, we can establish, furthermore, that public history is built on historiographical methods but also those of media and communications studies, that it attempts to serve the various expectations of target groups and the values espoused by its makers, that it works in collaboration with the public as well as with scholars and experts in other fields, and that it constantly reflects on its own work (Lyon et al., 2017).

5. HISTORICAL DIDACTICS IN PUBLIC HISTORY

The abovementioned keywords narrativity and multiperspectivity indicate that the field of historical didactics plays a vital role in the degree program in Berlin. A core aspect of public history is not just the mere description of its subject but the "study and analysis of how historical knowledge is conveyed to a broader audience" (Zündorf, 2017). Historical didactics is primarily concerned with the communication of history. Communicating historical knowledge is not understood here as the one-sided process of transferring academic knowledge to an uneducated but teachable mass of the population, but as providing a supply of well-researched educational opportunities that allow individuals to acquire historical knowledge of the past in their own living environment. If historical didactics is primarily concerned with the acquisition of historical knowledge in the context of *schools*, its activities in recent years have expanded to include history work outside of these educational institutions. The idea that the past can be appropriated as history *following certain criteria* (and that only through this process is history created at all) is a basic assumption of historical didactics. In the Berlin degree program, the (frequent) focus on schools is broadened to encompass the general public sphere, thereby harnessing criteria of "good" historical learning for the production and reception of history in the public sphere.

The study of history, or so one basic assumption of historical didactics, opens up a space of reflection for contemplating the fundamental temporality of the world. Historical learning is essentially about taking the experience of change and transformation in the past and making it productive through historical narrative. History, or more precisely the telling of stories about change in the past, can show the learners and beneficiaries of public history in a fundamental way that transformation is a constant of our world, and one with causes and effects. In addition, we take it as a matter of course that it is always important to address multiple perspectives on past realities.

Some important principles of historical learning have thus been touched upon which equally apply to public history and are worth enumerating here once again: narrativity (because public history is self-narrated history), multiperspectivity (because multiple viewpoints should always come into play), and imagination (because history comes alive in the public performance of imaginative ideas).

6. FOCUS AND STRUCTURE OF THE PUBLIC HISTORY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAM IN BERLIN

The Berlin degree program has a special focus on historiographical and historical-cultural debates in particular with regard to contemporary history. Contemporary history, defined as the history of “those still living among us” (Rothfels, 1953: 2) and also as the “history of controversy” (Sabrow et al., 2002), is characterized by intense and highly emotional public debate over the presentation of history. In Germany this refers above all to discussions on the history of Nazism and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), but more recently to the Weimar Republic as well, Germany’s first (and failed) attempt at democracy. The result has been numerous exhibits, films and books about the period after 1918 which students can focus on in their studies. But this is not the only reason that contemporary history is an especially interesting area of public history. It is this period that offers the greatest variety of sources to work with. In addition to classical documents and written materials, there are official and private photo, audio and video materials. There are also contemporary witnesses who can be interviewed about their memories.

The degree program covers the classic hermeneutical methods as well as those of visual history, sound history, digital history, oral history and material culture to ensure that these sources are used appropriately. To this end we have developed seven modules in which students can engage with these approaches in a theoretical and practical manner.

The first module is called “**Topics and Controversies in Modern History**”. It has the most traditional seminar format and provides a bridge from the B.A. to the M.A. program. It conveys both content and methodological skills in the field of German and European Modern History. Moreover, it discusses historical issues while taking into consideration their political relevance as well as their relevance to the culture of remembrance.

The second module focuses on “**Historical Learning**” and provides students with the academic foundations of historical education. Students not only learn theoretical concepts, but are taught how to link theory and practice and thus to recognize criteria they can use to profitably analyze the products of public history. This is combined with field trips and discussions with people from museum educational services who have firsthand experience in historical learning.

In the third module, dealing with “**Computer-Aided Research and the Presentation of History**”, students become familiar with computer-assisted tools in the fields of history and are introduced to the principles of online publishing. Students learn to create their own website (without having to learn programming) and analyze history presentations on the Internet. Gaining media literacy is the main purpose of this module.

In Module 4, called “**Media, Communication and the Public in Historical Perspective**”, we deal with a range of problems, methods and concepts of communications research and discuss them by way of select research case studies. Topics include the politics of history in movies and television, connections between social development and new forms of communication, and the role of the contemporary witness in various forms of documentation.

Module 5 concentrates on “**Areas of Historical Practice**”. In this seminar, public historians and practitioners from areas such as the media, museums and memorial sites, private businesses and associations offer an introduction to their working field and expertise. The seminar is followed by an eight-week internship.

Module 6, “**Theories and Forms of Historical Representation**”, teaches different approaches, theories and forms of historical representation. Students analyze, theorize and apply some common presentations of history in the public sphere and academic discourse. They learn how to write different types of non-scholarly texts and to analyze the aesthetic strategies and features of various exhibitions on field trips.

Module 7 deals with “**Public Relations and Cultural Management**”. The seminar conveys practical knowledge and skills in marketing, organizational theory and communication in the areas of public relations and cultural management. Moreover, students become familiar with the legal aspects of contracts, events, foundations, press work, copyright, and cultural promotion in the private and public spheres. We cannot, of course, turn our students into cultural managers, but we can help them learn that public historians provide a service. As their future work will often confront them with conflicts between upholding scholarly standards and satisfying market requirements, the module can help them better understand these processes and acquaint them with a market perspective.

Students, in addition, are expected to take a further module not directly related to public history but in the social sciences, humanities or cultural studies at a Berlin university. The curriculum covers four semesters and runs as shown in Figure 1:

Semester	Modules/ contents			
1 st term	Module 1 Topics and Controversies in Modern History seminar + workshop	Module 2 Historical Learning seminar (part 1)	Module 5 Areas of Historical Practice seminar	Module 3 Computer-Aided Research and Historical Representation workshop
2 nd term	Module 4 Media, communication and the public in historical perspective seminar + workshop	Module 2 Historical Learning seminar (part 2)	Module 5 Areas of Historical Practice internship	
3 rd term	Module 6 Theories and Forms of Historical Representation seminar + workshop	Related area Seminar + workshop (elective)		
4 th term	Module 7 Public Relations and Cultural Management workshop	Master's Thesis		

Figure 1: Curriculum of the Public History Master's Program, Freie Universität Berlin

Each module contains a seminar of a more theoretical nature and a practical exercise. The exercises call for developing and implementing a practical project. These include online services that are relatively easy to implement yet fulfill all the requirements of public history. The objective here is for students to learn to present complex historical relationships in an accessible, interesting, entertaining and vivid way, allowing for their relatively rapid consumption without a great deal of previous knowledge on the part of users. The project should include a variety of media - photographs, films, sounds, texts and images - with explanatory aids in a variety of text formats. To offer some examples, the following products have been developed in this manner: an audio walk on a main commercial thoroughfare in Berlin dealing with the SA (Nazi storm troopers) riots of 1931 (Kudamm 31, 2013); a website on the history of the Federal Ministry of the Interior and its predecessor during the Nazi era (BMI, 2017); a website on the history of a street in Berlin from the eighteenth century down to the present (Strasse, 2016); and an online exhibit of private photographs documenting the German invasion of Poland in 1939 (GHWK, 2019). Other projects have included exhibits at various locations, such as the temporary presentation on "Routes of Migration" in Berlin and a traveling exhibit on the role of the theater in the waning years of the GDR. Still other exhibits have been organized in cooperation with museums and memorial sites, such as one on the experience of imprisonment and its aftereffects at the SA prison memorial on Papestrasse in Berlin or one with the Lindenstrasse memorial about "Youth, Protest and Spying" in a provincial town in the GDR from 1949 to 1953. The most recent project is a film about a private GDR museum and its director, made in cooperation with film students. The trailer can be viewed here: <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/raeume-voller-erinnerungen>. An important aspect of all of these projects is that the students are involved in every phase - brainstorming, conception, research, selection, and text generation - as well as in project planning, budgeting, and the clarification of any legal issues, e.g., image permissions. Ultimately, every aspect of project work should be experienced, discussed and elaborated by students.

7. MASTER'S THESIS

Graduation from the public history master's program at the Freie Universität Berlin also entails a written master's thesis. Project work alone - e.g., an exhibit or a website - will not be accepted in lieu of a thesis. Suitable thesis topics are an analysis of historical presentations or the conception and discussion of such presentations. A number of examples below will serve to illustrate what a thesis project might look like.

In the area of museums and memorial sites, existing exhibits or pedagogical aids such as guided tours, audio guides or apps can be analyzed with regard to their historical interpretations, intercultural learning, participation, emotional content or the meaning of authenticity.

Movies, magazines or social media can also be investigated with regard to the historical interpretations they convey. Further discussion might address which institutions of cultural remembrance use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc., and to what extent this is meaningful. Monuments, whether existing ones, those slated to be removed or those being erected, are also part of public history. The monument itself is of interest here as well as the discourse surrounding it. This can be expanded to include built legacies, either individual structures or entire architectural ensembles. Streets named after historical figures would also fall into this category.

Thesis projects do not necessarily need to proceed from the medium, but can focus on the sources used. Apart from the question of how certain video or audio material is integrated in historical presentations, the use of contemporary witnesses is also a key concern of public history. Projects might address the use of contemporary witnesses in documentary films, exhibits and websites or the presentations of these witnesses by networking agencies.

But a thesis might just as well investigate the way certain themes are dealt with in general in cultures of remembrance. The focus might be on individuals, eras, regions or special topics such as the evolution of the automobile or the image of the mother in history.

Another topic for master's theses is the politics of history. The election platforms of political parties or government statements can be investigated with regard to any historical references they make or possibly exploit for their own purposes. The state's approach to anniversaries and remembrance days can also be investigated with regard to their use of history. How are they commemorated, how are they staged, who participates and how? It is not just in politics, however, that history is instrumentalized, but also in the economy. A look at advertising or corporate histories intended for a general audience are good points of analysis.

While feature films and computer games are primarily intended for entertainment, they can nonetheless produce interpretations of history. A closer examination of these constructs can also be the topic of a master's thesis - and, indeed, is a more and more popular one of late.

Apart from analyses of this sort, another possible master's thesis topic is the development of one's own historical presentations in any of the abovementioned areas. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the presentation alone is not sufficient as a thesis project, but that the core aspect of the thesis is to critically reflect on this presentation.

In sum, possible topics include an analysis of existing historical presentations in a variety of media, questions concerning the politics of history, and the conception of and critical reflection upon historical presentations yet to be developed by the student.

8. OCCUPATIONAL FIELDS

In conclusion we will take a brief look at the specific **occupational fields** public historians are potentially being prepared for. These can be grouped into different categories. One major area is **museums and memorial sites**. The work of museum curators as well as museum and memorial educators is particularly noteworthy. The key question here is how objects, images and sounds are used in space to create a historical narrative. In the case of memorial sites, the task of commemoration and the approach to victims and/or their family is of paramount importance.

Another occupational field is the **media**. This includes documentary films, radio, newspapers and periodicals, as well as advertising agencies. It likewise entails companies that develop apps or audio walks. If space is the key component of museums and memorial sites, in this case the distinctive feature is the media format of these presentations. The film needs moving pictures, the radio sounds, periodicals words and photos.

Public historians are also employed in **politics and administration**. Activities connected to the public involve writing speeches or press statements. The written and spoken word predominates here. Moreover, this area involves developing and evaluating funding concepts and, in this context more so than in the other working areas, the discussion of general questions about cultures of remembrance.

A final, self-contained sector worth mentioning is **historical tourism**, which has expanded considerably in recent years. The possibilities are endless here, from multi-day historical trips abroad or historical day trips through a city, to guided tours, cycling tours or bus tours at select locations. The public historian's job includes coming up with an overall concept, researching the respective background material and information, and conducting the actual tours themselves. Aside from the abovementioned sources, the work incorporates buildings and landscapes.

All of these working areas have a focus on the conception of presentations using a variety of media formats (documents, photographs, films, audio, mobile and immobile objects as well as landscapes) and authoring of a wide range of text types, from the narrative in documentaries and radio, through magazine articles, political speeches, explanatory comments on urban walking tours, to plaques and captions in museum

exhibits. The presentations should be informative and entertaining at the same time, while still fulfilling the abovementioned standards. The extent to which historical presentations can offer real historical insights while still be entertaining, the role that financial criteria and profit motives play, and the influence of attempts to accommodate the assumed interests of the public are different in each individual case and need to be renegotiated each time. In developing historical presentations for a broadest possible audience, public historians are always juggling the competing pressures of their “interest in educating audiences and the commercial interest in providing leisure” (Cauvin, 2016: 13).

9. CONCLUSION

The master’s program presented here may be rather German in its thematic and theoretical foundations but can easily be transferred to other cultural contexts. In particular the two-pillar model, with almost equal attention being given to theory and practice, is applicable in any setting. The emphasis on one or the other might be different at other universities or in different countries, and yet we consider it indispensable that public history as a university discipline address both aspects. A thematic focus on contemporary history (not to mention Nazism and the GDR) is certainly not required. The concentration on these topics is due to their importance in German history. Other countries will have other focal points. Another characteristic feature of the Berlin program that is easily applicable to other contexts is its strong emphasis on historical didactics and hence on questions of historical learning. This methodological approach offers a range of analytical criteria (narrativity, multiperspectivity, imagination) derived from the field of historical didactics and applied to the subject of public history.

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