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History of Historiography  
Geschichte der Geschichtsschreibung

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83-84 · 1-2 / 2023



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# The (Un)faithful Mirror of the ICHTH: the Scholarly Journal *Storia della storiografia* and the Developments in the History and Theory of Historical Writing<sup>1</sup>

Edoardo Tortarolo

**ABSTRACT** · This article examines the history and evolution of the scientific journal *Storia della Storiografia*, created in 1982 as an instrument of the Commission for the History of Historiography. The journal was established in a context marked by the Cold War, aiming to build an international network of scholars across political boundaries. Promoted by an international panel of scholars and initially edited by Bianca Valota of the University of Milan, the multilingual journal (English, French, German, and Italian) sought to overcome the political barriers of the time. The journal has always maintained a strong connection with the Commission, serving as its official ‘organ’ and supporting the scientific legitimacy of the history of historiography. In the 1990s, under the presidency of Georg Iggers, the journal underwent radical changes, reflecting new theoretical and methodological trends, such as the globalization of historical vision, the postmodern approach, and an impartial assessment of Marxist historiographies. *Storia* also responded to the challenges of digitalization and the ‘gamification’ of history, striving to maintain an open and diverse dialogue among scholars from different traditions.

**KEYWORDS** · Historiography, Cultural Encounters, Historical Methodology, Academic Journals, Intellectual Dialogue.

**A**N important instrument of the Commission for the History of Historiography, founded in 1981, was the creation of the multilingual journal *Storia della storiografia*. Its creation in 1982 followed

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was read at the session “Between Georg Iggers and Hayden White: Forty Years of the International Commission for the History and Theory of Historiography”, August 25, 2022, at the CISH Congress in Poznan.

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closely the creation of the Commission itself, which was very much the product of Charles-Olivier Carbonell's efforts. The intellectual climate of the Cold War played an important role in the process that led to the creation of the journal. In a pre-Internet world, the creation of a scholarly journal was the only means of building a network of scholars across political boundaries. The recent biography of Karl Dietrich Erdmann by Arvid von Bassi also underlines the central role played by the desire to include the Marxist-Leninist approach to history in the international discussion led by the International Committee of Historical Sciences/Comité International des Sciences historiques (ICHS/CISH). This was also the primary concern of the Commission.<sup>2</sup> The peculiar nature of the journal stems from its function: it had to be the expression of the Commission and to lend academic prestige to its agenda.

The reason for the Italian title is self-explanatory. The driving force behind its creation was Professor Bianca Valota of the University of Milan. She taught the history of Eastern Europe with a focus on modern Romania, where she was born in Bucharest just after the end of the Second World War. She is the granddaughter of Nicolae Iorga, the historian and politician assassinated by the pro-Nazi Iron Guard in 1940. Bianca Valota's academic work and political commitment embodied the desire to overcome the political boundaries that isolated cultures that had been communicating for centuries. Quite apart from Bianca Valota's personal energy, Italy was indeed the right place to host the journal. Italy shared its eastern border with Yugoslavia. The Italian Communist Party, generously subsidized by the Soviet Union, was the largest in Western Europe, polling over 34% in the 1976 general election. In Italy at the time, dialogue between the two blocs was an obvious step to pursue an agenda of common survival. Historiographies had to play a crucial role in the collective effort of mutual knowledge and understanding.

Consequently, four languages were used in *Storia*: English, French, German and Italian. Multilingualism was a political state-

<sup>2</sup> Arvid von Bassi, *Karl Dietrich Erdmann. Historiker, Wissenschaftsorganisator, Politiker* (Oldenburg: de Gruyter, 2022).

ment. The first issue contained a short introduction in all four languages, explaining the rationale and objectives of both the Commission and the magazine. Ironically, each translation emphasized a different aspect. The translations were by no means perfectly equivalent. The English introduction promised to focus on “an ever-widening range of issues and interests” in the future. The German text hinted at the aim of allowing more countries to express their visions of the past (“weitere Länder zu Wort zu kommen”).<sup>3</sup> Ironically, a deeply Catholic publishing house, Jaca Book in Milan, which specialises in inter-confessional dialogue, took on the task of printing the magazine and did a very good job. Public subsidies from the Christian Democratic and Socialist government, a centre-left government, facilitated the launch of the journal, which also received funding from the Italian National Research Council (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, CNR), at least in the first years of its existence. This funding was gradually withdrawn in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Georg Iggers did not publish anything in the first issue of *Storia della Storiografia*. He was one of the editors and the driving force behind the project. His participation was not only in line with his role at the 15th ICHS/CISH Congress in Bucharest in 1980, but above all with his research agenda as a mediator between different political spheres and methodological approaches. His firm belief that dialogue was the key to human life also applied to intellectual matters. Consequently, dialogue and diversity were the hallmarks of the editorial board, which included scholars from Eastern Europe such as Militsa Vasilevna Nechkina, Ernst Engelberg and Jerzy Topolski, as well as Geoffrey Barraclough, Pierre Chaunu, Furio Diaz, Karl-Dietrich Erdmann, Jean Glénisson, Bernard Guenée, Arnaldo Momigliano, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Boyd Shafer, Leo Valiani and Rudolf Vierhaus. The Editorial Committee included Georg Iggers and a carefully balanced team of distinguished and experienced scholars: Lucian Boia, Romania; Andrzej Grabski, Poland; Hans Schleier, East German Academy of Sciences; Charles-Olivier Carbonell, West German Karl-Georg Faber. The editor-in-chief was

<sup>3</sup> *Storia della Storiografia*, 1, 1982.

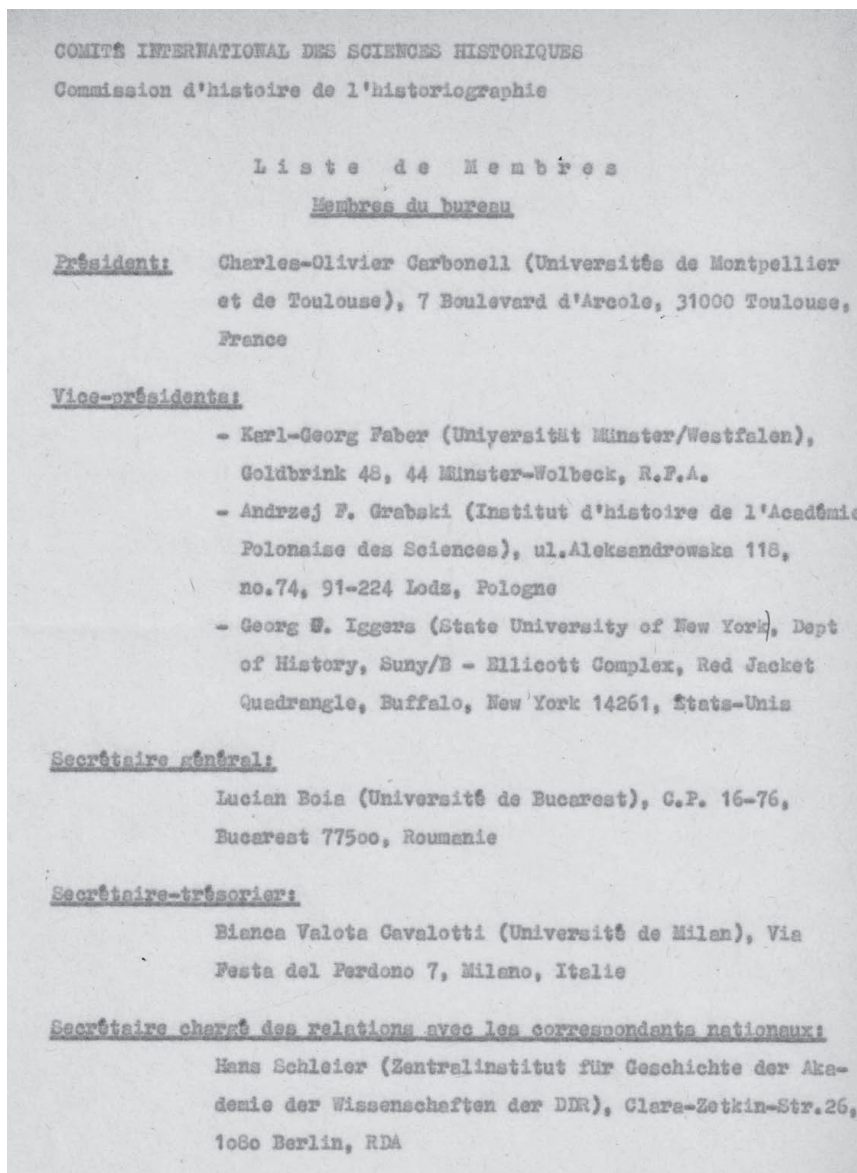


FIG. 1. Original CISH typescript with list of members of the Commission for the History of Historiography.

Bianca Valota. For ten years *Storia* was closely linked to the Commission. *Storia* was, in a sense, the 'house organ' of the Commission, or, as the Italian version of the preface put it, its "mouthpiece"



(‘organo’). The emerging discipline of the history of historiography was the focus of the essays published in the first issues, which argued for its legitimacy. Carbonell’s manifesto, “Pour une Histoire de l’historiographie”, asserted the scientific autonomy and dignity of the history of historiography against those who considered it a bibliographic mania, irrelevant and possibly harmful to the proper study of the past. Against the late-nineteenth-century positivism and a-historical structuralism that were gaining ground, Carbonell sought to expose a simplistic understanding of the ‘document’. The history of historiography, he wrote in this manifesto, was “a specific, autonomous, enriching and passionate discipline”. It was an essential part of the process by which twentieth-century culture abandoned the claim to absolute truth in historical knowledge and accepted “the relativisation of historical knowledge and, therefore, the need to know its evolution”. Carbonell identified Benedetto Croce, Marxism and the ‘Nouvelle Histoire’ as the protagonists of this birth of a true history of historiography: “The history of historiography turns into a long, open-ended conclusion: it is no longer the genealogy of a form of knowledge, but rather a ‘voyage de l’intelligence’, a journey of insightful creativity”. According to Carbonell, during the twentieth century, historical culture emancipated itself from a one-dimensional concept of truth. In the first issue of *Storia*, prominent scholars such as Fulvio Tessitore, Lucian Boia and Zhang Zhi-Lian contributed essays arguing for the existence and intellectual autonomy of the history of historiography as an independent and autonomous discipline.

Georg Iggers contributed an essay on the Göttingen School of History to the second issue, beginning a collaboration that was to last more than 30 years. The bibliography of Georg Iggers’ writings published in 2018 shows that his involvement in *Storia* was constant and remarkable, with a total of 13 contributions from 1982 to 2016.<sup>4</sup>

In particular, it should be emphasized that his role changed significantly during this period. I would argue that he helped to emancipate the journal from the Commission, while at the same time emancipating the Commission from its origins and recent past. In

<sup>4</sup> *Storia della Storiografia*, 73 (2018): 45-67.

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FIGG. 2-3. Original tables of Contents of nos. 24 (1993) and 25 (1994) of *Storia della Storiografia*, devoted to the twentieth anniversary of *Metahistory* publication.

achieving this dual objective, Georg Iggers helped the Commission and the journal to better understand the transformation after 1989. At the 1990 ICHS/CISH Congress in Madrid, the Cold War agenda was no longer the top priority. The Commission and the journal were no longer meant to be the middle ground where representatives of two opposing views could discuss and confront each other in a neutral field. Georg Iggers helped to reframe the theoretical discussion, while keeping an eye on the actual output of historians after 1989-1990. Both the Commission and the journal benefited from Georg Iggers' quietly adventurous spirit in the 1990s and 2000s. He was President of the Commission from 1995 to 2000, succeeding Wolfgang J. Mommsen. Since 1991 he was also one of the three editors of *Storia della storiografia*, together with Guido Abbattista (University of Trieste) and myself. Both the Commission and the journal were affected by the radical changes in the political and

intellectual context. The Commission for the History of Historiography was officially renamed the International Commission for the History and Theory of Historiography at the Oslo Congress in 2000, following a lively discussion that had begun at the Montreal Congress in 1995. This was a consequence of a general reorientation from Carbonell's manifesto of 1982 to an interest in the theory of historiography, which was increasingly expressed in the Commission during the 1990s. Georg Iggers was fully aware of the growing attraction of theoretical questions and the expanding field of historical research. New questions were coming to the fore, and new areas of inquiry were gaining prominence.

At the same time, the journal seemed to have lost its focus: its association with the Commission for the History of Historiography was becoming more of a liability than a source of inspiration and effectiveness, especially in the eyes of Wolfgang Justinus Mommsen, the president of the commission from 1990 to 1995. In 1991, he made a clean break with the past and decided that the journal should go to sea and compete in the open market of ideas and subscriptions. Georg Iggers played a major role in both. He developed a keen interest in aspects of the historical debate that were crucial to him in the post-Cold War era. As a cosmopolitan historian, he was particularly familiar with the English and German historical literature.

Three aspects of Georg Iggers' scholarly interests since the 1990s stand out as particularly fundamental. 1. The globalization of the historical vision, including non-European approaches and methods; 2. the postmodern approach to history; 3. a fair, unbiased assessment of Marxist historiographies, which have been badly damaged and discredited by the collapse of the Soviet geopolitical order. Georg tackled these issues in an intellectually open and straightforward manner.

The discussion on postmodern historiography was particularly lively in the 1990s. *Storia* made a sustained effort to meet this challenge. Thanks to several collaborators, *Storia* published two consecutive issues assessing the impact of Hayden White's *Metahistory* 20 years after its publication, in 1993-1994 (nos. 24-25). Hayden

White's book challenged the traditional form of objectivity. As He Wu-yi has written, Georg admitted that "professional historiography was not entirely objective or scientific, but he did not believe that all serious historical inquiry could be reduced to ideology" or rhetorical nonsense.<sup>5</sup> As well as exploring the theoretical dimensions of the postmodern paradigm, *Storia* has pursued an empirical interest in considering the different ways in which historical theories have actually been applied to the practice of historiography.

The table of contents shows the range of topics covered in the two issues devoted to *Metahistory*.

The two 1993-1994 issues are representative of the approach adopted by *Storia*. On the one hand, the collaboration with the members of the Commission and the Bureau was constant and fruitful. On the other hand, *Storia* was developing, or at least trying to develop, its own position in a field where the journal *History and Theory* was gaining a dominant position in the discussion of theoretical issues. What was most important in the 1993 issue on *Metahistory* was its contribution to the historicisation and contextualisation of historical visions and historical cultures. *Storia* has followed the shift towards a more self-reflexive approach to all questions of historical research. However, there was a strong consensus among the three editors that the empirical approach, which had been the main feature of the origins of *Storia* should be maintained, albeit under different circumstances. The two 1993-1994 issues are a case in point.

Over the past 40 years, both the Commission and the journal have undergone quite dramatic changes. With the benefit of hindsight, I would argue that both have successfully fulfilled their mission. Both have dealt with a clean break in their existence: the end of the Cold War in historiography for the Commission, and the emancipation of the journal from the Commission. Now they face a fundamental challenge, both theoretical and practical. Please allow me to spend the last minute outlining this challenge. The popularization of the Internet has affected the way we research,

<sup>5</sup> He Wu-yi, "A Recollection of Georg G. Iggers", *Storia della storiografia*, 73 (2018): 39.

narrate and make sense of the past. It has dematerialized sources and means of communication to an unprecedented degree; it has widened the circle of researchers committed to professional historiography; it has also increased the number of insular and dogmatic interpretations; the gamification of history is a growing trend worldwide. The creation of the infosphere will not leave the Commission or *Storia* unaffected. What does the future hold for historians?

The two protagonists of the Commission's and *Storia*'s history, Georg Iggers and Hayden White, recognized the challenges of their time, albeit in different ways. In the present circumstances, the appropriate way to assess their role in the history of our discipline is to emphasize how unflinchingly open they were in identifying and commenting on what was new, original, innovative, abrasive, thought-provoking, disturbing and offensive.



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