

## Conference Report

# Why it makes sense to reflect on the past

DAAD-Doktorandenkonferenz

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Lessons from the past have limited value, said Dutch economist and professor in Future Studies Dr. Patrick van der Duin on 8 December 2015 in Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*.<sup>1</sup> 'On close inspection, history never repeats itself, it is as simple as that. Often it is even counterproductive to draw historical parallels, he argued: 'constantly referring to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example, paralyzes the debate on ground troops in Syria'.<sup>2</sup> Van der Duin concluded from this that historians – who stress the importance of the past – exert too much influence on public debate. 'It is as if we are mostly looking in the rearview mirror while driving. No wonder we are always surprised by that which occurs.'<sup>3</sup>

The young scholars brought together by the international *Doktoranden* conference 'Was lehrt die Geschichte? Zur politischen und gesellschaftlichen Relevanz historischer Analogien am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts' (8-13 December, 2015) could not have wished for a better point of departure. The conference took place in Amsterdam, Maastricht, and Bonn respectively, and was organized on the initiative of the *Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst* (DAAD) by the Duitsland Instituut Amsterdam (DIA). Of course historians know better than anyone else that history does not repeat itself. But does this mean that the past cannot teach us anything? Or

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<sup>1</sup> M. van Calmthout, 'Lessen uit het verleden van beperkte waarde', *De Volkskrant*, 8 December 2015. Source: <http://goo.gl/XU9Pk1>. For a shorter, Dutch version of this text, see: Van der Heijde, H. and M. Oprel, 'Conferentie: reflecteren op geschiedenis heeft zin', [www.duitslandweb.nl](http://www.duitslandweb.nl).

<sup>2</sup> 'Geschiedenis herhaalt zich op de keper beschouwd nooit, zo simpel is dat [...] Steeds verwijzen naar de Amerikaanse inval in Irak in 2003 slaat bijvoorbeeld de discussie over grondtroepen in Syrië dood.' All English translations are my own. Source: *ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> 'Het is alsof we vooral in de achteruitkijkspiegel kijken bij het autorijden. Vind je het dat we voortdurend worden verrast door wat er opdoemt?'. Source: *ibidem*.

could it indeed make sense to draw historical analogies? During a varied, five-day programme in both German and English, PhD students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and from all over the world addressed the classical question of 'learning from history'.

### **Learning from the past**

'Studying the past tells us more about the subject that wants to learn than about the object that is being studied', opened Ton Nijhuis, Director of the DIA, the conference. The phrase 'what does history teach us' (*was lehrt die Geschichte*) is misleading, as it assumes, wrongly, that history itself can teach. It is therefore more accurate to refer to *learning from history* (*lernen aus die Geschichte*), which presupposes an *act*. People are often unaware of their own assumptions, their *Standortgebundenheit*, argued Nijhuis. For this reason, it is productive to engage in dialogue. Other perspectives offer insight into one's own position and prove that there may well be completely different views on the matter in question.

Different perspectives, dependent on time and space, thus lead to divergent interpretations of the past. The heated debates in Germany on the Nazi past are a case in point. Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, moreover, has proven the added value of exchanging perspectives: not only did it make the Nazi past subject of broad public discussion, it also served (and serves) as a means to advocate common values. Another, more recent example is the current debate on the role of the European Union in the Ukrainian crisis. Within this debate different interpretations of the past – and related underlying interests – play an essential role.

### **Politics and 'historical framing'**

The political instrumentalization of history by using historical analogies was a recurrent theme in the guest lectures, workshops, and presentations of the PhD students. Guest speaker Hans Kribbe, until 2005 working as a political aide to EU Commissioners Neelie Kroes and Frits Bolkestein and more recently, among other things, as an advisor to the Russian government about EU policies, adopted a sober attitude: 'any attempt to apply "lessons learned from history" to current political matters is an act of politics'.

Politicians use history merely as a tool to justify their political intentions, knew Kribbe from experience. They often draw simplistic historical analogies to frame (and thereby legitimate) their actions. For every analogy drawn, however, there is another analogy, which proves the exact opposite. 'History can play quite a dangerous role in political relations', argued Kribbe. It is therefore the responsibility of scholars to deconstruct the frames that politicians create. Learning from history will only be possible, when we become aware of the relativity of constructed narratives.

The Ukrainian crisis, which has deteriorated relations between Russia and the West, provides a fine example of Kribbe's argument. In an interview in March 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin compared the Maidan protests in Kiev with the 'kind of chaos' that had brought Hitler to power.<sup>4</sup> According to Putin, the insurgency in Ukraine, actively supported by the West, forced Russia to act out of humanitarian considerations and to defend itself against approaching aggressors.<sup>5</sup> On 1 September 2014, by contrast – during the annual commemoration of Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 in Danzig, Poland – *Bundespräsident* Joachim Gauck compared Russia's annexation of Crimea with the aggression of Nazi Germany. In reference to the failed appeasement policy of the British, Gauck stated: 'history teaches us that territorial concessions only feed the appetite of aggressors'.<sup>6</sup>

Gauck's call for action evoked the wrath of a number of prominent German historians. They cautioned Gauck not to draw direct lessons from the past. Moreover, his historical analogy had made no reference to Germany's own full-scale invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Gauck's one-sided, inflammatory statement could well have unintended negative consequences.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> V. Putin, 'Vladimir Putin answered journalists' questions on the situation in Ukraine', <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366>, 4 March 2014.

<sup>5</sup> B. Petersson and C. F. Stokholm Banke, 'Ukraine and the disenchantment of Europe' in H. Persson, B. Petersson and C. F. Stokholm Banke (eds.), *Playing the second fiddle? Contending visions of Europe's future development* (Malmö: Universus Academic Press, 2015) 175-187, online version: <http://bit.ly/1RdjiOX>, 6.

<sup>6</sup> J. Gauck, 'Bundespräsident Joachim Gauck anlässlich der Gedenkfeier zum deutschen Überfall auf Polen 1939', [bit.ly/1B9vzJI](http://bit.ly/1B9vzJI) (Danzig, 1 September 2014) 4. According to Gauck, Germany would directly oppose 'those who break international law, annex alien territory and support divisions in other countries militarily'. See: *ibidem*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> N. Frei et al., 'Europas Trauma', *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 205, Wochenendbeilage (6-7 September 2014) 1.

The historians' reaction and Kribbe's plea pose the question to what extent scholars can detach themselves from their own biased assumptions, while carrying out the noble task of deconstructing. Which narratives should replace the ones that are being deconstructed? Moreover, when do scholars ever agree with each other? Most participants of the conference concluded that historical research should always include an explicit formulation of the author's perspective. This, in combination with thorough source criticism, a careful selection of one's source material, and exchanging views with other scholars regularly, will help create critical, more nuanced historical narratives.

### **A general distrust of politics**

Prior to Kribbe's lecture, the PhD students had participated in a heated discussion about whether, and if so how, historians can contribute constructively to political decision-making. Most participants were deeply skeptical about this kind of collaboration between historians and politicians. 'Historical analogies do not do justice to the specific character (*die Eigenart*) of the past', said American PhD student and self-declared Neo-Rankean James McSpadden. The risk that politicians are appropriating your research to just serve their self-interests is simply too high. In general, the practice of politics leaves little room for differentiation or the complexities of the past.

The animated discussion was characterized by a profound distrust of 'politics'. 'Criticizing is easy', argued workshop leader and historian Cecilie Felicia Stokholm Banke of the Danish Institute for International Studies against this skepticism. 'Historians are particularly good at it. But of all people, should not historians with their in-depth knowledge of, say, conflict areas, advise politicians and decision-makers?'

### **Eighteenth-century breast-feeding campaigns**

The conference was not just aimed at analyzing historical analogies as being political propaganda; the PhD students had also been asked to reflect on the potential added *value* of using historical analogies. Czech-Canadian Martina Chumova succeeded in proving this added value by drawing a historical parallel between eighteenth-century breast-feeding campaigns (*Stillkampagnen*) and current public health campaigns.

From the eighteenth century onwards, people increasingly considered breast-feeding a maternal duty. Medical, scientifically-based arguments were put forward to evoke feelings of guilt and shame with mothers who could not or would not breast-feed. In current public health campaigns as well, breast-feeding takes on both a medical dimension (the baby's health) and a social dimension (breast-feeding as a maternal duty). By drawing a historical analogy, Chumova illustrated, these distinguishing features come to the fore.

Historical analogies can thus be used in different ways, concluded historian Georgi Verbeeck (University of Maastricht) during the conference's last session in the *Haus der Geschichte* in Bonn. On the hand, they are used as 'ordinary' historical comparisons, which are essential to all historical research. As such, historical analogies serve as a frame of reference. In addition, it could even be argued that people *always* compare implicitly between that what they consider the norm and that what they consider deviating from this norm. On the other hand, as also Kribbe cautioned, historical analogies are used to substantiate political decision-making. Precisely because of this dual function – and because in practice, often these two functions (partially) overlap – special caution is required with respect to using and interpreting historical analogies.

After five intense days, the majority of the PhD students concluded that historical analogies, provided that they are subject to critical analysis, can indeed add value. Both in academic research, as well as in politics, using historical analogies encourages reflection. The past itself cannot teach us anything; reflecting on the past, however, can. The rearview mirror sheds light on a variety of alternative ways of thinking and teaches us to ask new questions.

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