

# On the “Contemporary European History” Handbook Series

Do we need a new handbook series on contemporary European history? Asking this question leads to a range of related questions. At a time when the idea of “Europe” and the project of European integration are being questioned by some and defended by others, what is the role of historians in writing about Europe? What kind of historical accounts do they have to offer? Should they point out the complexity of European societies and histories as reasons for the difficulties in creating a “European identity,” or should they emphasize the degree to which European integration has successfully taken place on different levels? Should they analyze the tension between national, regional, and local factors in shaping the self-understanding of individuals and social groups, or should they concern themselves more with the functioning of transnational and supranational structures of Europe? More generally, is it at all possible to cover European history in a handbook format? If so, which definition of Europe should serve as the conceptual framework connecting the various volumes, which regions should be included or excluded, and which actors should stand at the center of attention?

These questions are difficult to answer but useful to ask because they alert us to the challenges historical research on Europe currently faces. Fortunately, we do not stand empty-handed in front of these challenges. For one, the field of European history has developed remarkably over the past two or three decades, not only within Europe but also in many other parts of the world where Europe has become an increasingly interesting object of investigation since it suggests itself to comparisons and presents an important hub in a connected world. Secondly, the traditional identification of Europe with Western Europe has been challenged by a new generation of historians who are writing histories that leave behind narrow dichotomies like East and West, North and South. Thirdly, European history is no longer presented as a loose bundle of national entities and their predecessor states but is seen more as an assemblage of various imperial structures. These developments have resulted in a research perspective that looks at the interaction between the metropolises of the European empires as well as their colonies and other seemingly peripheral regions. European history is now understood as having been profoundly shaped by empires “striking back.” Relatedly, many historians have replaced diffusionist approaches with concepts like circulation and reception. Finally, the dialogue with global history has challenged traditional periodizations of European histo-

ry. While the Eurocentric view privileged inward-looking perspectives, the integration of transregional comparisons has produced more nuanced ideas about the relevant timeframe. Contemporary history as the history of trends familiar to contemporaries is not necessarily the history of present times. It has been argued that the history of modern globalization dates back to the mid- or late nineteenth century. Europe has played an important role in such processes, and in many ways its current shape is a product of those processes. This is not to deny the relevance of caesuras like the two World Wars and the end of the Cold War, but it highlights the complicated relationship between politics, economics, the cultural, and the social in the history of a large space like Europe. Not all pieces of this puzzle are following the same logic, as we have learned from recent historical research that has gone through the postmodern school of accepting fragmentation as a crucial feature in society.

The Contemporary European History handbook series responds to this situation and draws on it as inspiration and opportunity. Instead of lamenting the difficulties of neatly defining “Europe,” the series consciously embraces a multifaceted approach to studying contemporary European history, one which is driven by an understanding of “Europe in the world” rather than considering Europe a closed entity. Without giving up the belief that some historical accounts are more accurate and persuasive than others, the series emphasizes the multiplicity of approaches and interpretations available and presents them as possibilities to be tested against future research.

To live up to this agenda, this series avoids the more conventional structure of handbooks as it has been common in the past, when volumes were built on categories like “nationalism,” “violence,” “economy,” “social movements,” and “gender.” Contrastingly, the Contemporary European History series puts human activities at the center of attention: “Reading,” “cooking,” “administering,” “communicating,” “protecting,” “selling,” “working,” “protesting,” and “musicking,” to name just a few. This allows the volumes to reach across regional and temporal divides, to include a variety of methodological and conceptual approaches, and to provide the basis for comparisons that promise to shed new light on European history. In avoiding narrow and, at times, artificial categorizations, and by promoting an activity-centered view, this handbook series aims to offer a fresh view of European history that reflects the rich body of research available and the methodological diversity that mark the field.

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