

Associations Make History: The Society for Hessian History (1837)

Abstract

The Society for Hessian History was one of the many regional associations founded in the early 19th century to research and promote local history. This newsletter describes how and why the association was founded in 1834 and then presents its charter. Texts such as this provide insight into the type of knowledge that members felt was essential to researching, preserving, and disseminating their local past. In this case, it is also interesting to note the emphasis on maps—including linguistic ones—and dictionaries for dialects. This newsletter demonstrates the great interest in local history and how that history related to the “German” history of the fatherland in the decades before the founding of the Reich.

Source

Founding of the Society for Hessian History and Regional Studies

The first invitation to form this society was issued by His Royal Highness Bernhardi, Landau, von Rommel, and Schubart on 16 August 1834. “Since,” as it reads in this document, “the noble and truly German Freiherr von Stein powerfully inspired and revived source research for the general history of our fatherland through the founding of the Society for the Ancient History of Germany, societies have been formed in almost all German lands, which seek to perform for the particular history of individual regions that which sometimes eludes, and sometimes must remain unconsidered by, historical researchers who have their sights set on Germany as a whole. The merit of these efforts—through which it alone becomes possible to view, organize, and furnish with the necessary local, historical, and geographical information the documents and artifacts in each individual, vast domain of German historical sources, and to make these public in an appropriate selection, or to make them accessible to the historiographer—is so widely recognized by all the friends of the history of the fatherland, that an invitation to form such a society for Hessian history and regional studies needs no further justification.”

“In Austria, Prussia, Hanover, Saxony, Bavaria, Baden, and Nassau, numerous societies are already competing in the laudable effort to save from the ruins of derelict monuments and from the mold of decaying archives all documents about the deeds and fates of their fathers, which by happy accident have been preserved thus far; why should Hesse not eagerly join with them? We lack neither glorious memories from the past, nor love and devotion to our native soil, nor men who study the history of their fatherland with zeal and success! Until now only a fruitful collaboration has been lacking, and therefore we may expect that this invitation will be favorably received in all parts and will bring to our society a sufficient number of active members.”

[...]

“Our society shall have the twofold purpose of conducting more precise and comprehensive research on the history of the fatherland, as only it is in a position to do; and of awakening the taste for the study of the fatherland and disseminating thorough knowledge of this subject by means of information from history and regional studies.”

“But we here understand our history not merely as an amassing of those events that conspicuously transformed and altered the external destiny of states; but rather, we prefer to understand it as the careful study of the inner life of the same, of particular situations, establishments, and forms, and spiritual development and constitution, in

addition to a faithful representation of these silently working forces, which have a much more powerful influence on the prosperity and suffering of a people than most wars, battles, and peace agreements. If we intended to devote our attention only to those events of world-historical significance, then the history of our fatherland would offer, at most, two or three points where the small state of Hesse was granted the privilege of placing a decisive weight on Europe's balance of power; but if we try to find out at what times and under what conditions our ancestors felt happy in their daily lives, and when and how they fell into need and distress, then a wide and fertile field is opened to us upon which our learning ripens for the present and for all future times. But in this case, we must also expand our horizons and take into view all the elements that determine the individual destiny of a people [*Volk*]:

First, the nature of the land that serves as their home location, including all the products of the three provinces of Hesse; then the people themselves in terms of their heritage, customs, and habits, and in terms of their economic and spiritual makeup; further,

in terms of the religion and churches of the same, according to their inherent power to elevate and oppress people; also the state and legal relations of the same; and finally,

world history itself, which sweeps along an individual people in its mighty strides, as well as the work of princes and lords of the land and of all exceptional minds that have had a decisive influence on the destiny of their fellow citizens.

“History, in this sense of the word, comprises all branches of human activity and function, and anyone can do his part to contribute to the perfect overview of the whole. Therefore we dared to enlist the support of men whose various professional activities only rarely permit an actual treatment of that which one ordinarily calls ‘history,’ without thereby raising the criticism of ill intentions; for we pursue no unilateral course, rather, we intend to write the inner history of our fatherland in all its ramifications, starting, on the one hand, from the beginnings of historical memory, and on the other hand, from the present situation of this land, as the two endpoints which must be connected through historical research according to their natural coherence, in other words, according to the unbroken chain of cause and effect. Therefore, whoever has a clear understanding of the contemporary situation of our fatherland with respect to his own field of expertise can advance our objectives with little effort and the sacrifice of only a few hours, by depositing the documents that are known to him in the archive for the society's use. If, however, he has familiarized himself with earlier conditions and with the gradual development of the institutions in which he is officially appointed to work, then he is certainly in a better position than just anyone to undertake rigorous historical research in this field: for example, a history of the earliest mining operations in Hesse, historical research on agriculture, a history of trades and guilds, examination of the former commercial roads and trade routes through Hesse, the emergence, development, and incorporation of Hessian towns and villages. Simply put, these are all tasks of great interest that the historian can only carry out in association with the real expert in this field, or which the latter can only accomplish with the support of the historian. —

[...]

In particular, the drafting of a map of the state of Hesse, based on trigonometric calculations and accurate in all its details, would be a worthy project for our society, since we are still confronted with the criticism that the most detailed map of Hesse, although designed by scholars of our fatherland, was nonetheless published only in a foreign language and riddled with errors introduced by an enemy that brought war to our land 70 years ago.”

[...]

“We are concerned not merely with research, not merely with the expansion of historical knowledge for its own sake; rather, the society must also take as its objective the promotion of the dissemination of thorough historical knowledge as much as possible. A journal to be founded by the society, in loose volumes, may well be the most suitable means to awaken and revive a taste for the history of our fatherland, and simultaneously, to fill the members of the society themselves with greater pleasure and zeal in their work. Scholarly analysis of their subjects is indeed the first requirement of the essays to be submitted, but the authors will simultaneously aim to connect this with as clear and lively a presentation as possible and will take pains that the educated reader will not be scared off by too great a quantity of information that, though important, is generally only understandable to the scholar. An editorial office closely associated with the board of directors will take care of the relevant business and be responsible for the acceptance of the most suitable essays.”

“If the society then succeeds, on the strength of its accomplishments, to achieve an honorable position among Germany’s other historical societies, then it may well come forward with a more comprehensive plan and motivate these societies to complete a national project in cooperation: namely, to design a linguistic map of all of Germany, and to compile precise dictionaries of the different dialects. The boundaries of the German language toward France and Italy and toward the Slavic languages are still largely unknown; and we know even less about the boundary of the High German dialect from Low German and the many gradations of the two, and yet the language is incontrovertibly one of the clearest makers of the original relationship between groups, and therefore is an important, previously almost totally ignored source for the ancient history of the people; to say nothing of the fact that such research is of essential value for the language itself. Moreover, it is high time to set this research in motion because the predominant written language is replacing one remnant of the old dialects after another, as the result of more thorough education with each passing year. Of course, this undertaking requires very careful scrutiny and special preparation; meanwhile we count among the society’s members men who are completely qualified for the direction of this research.”

[...]

Statutes of the Society for the History and Regional Studies of Hesse

§ 1. The purpose of the society is the comprehensive research and presentation of the history, topography, and statistics of Hesse.

§ 2. The following will serve as the basis for a comprehensive history of the land and its inhabitants, and therefore, will comprise the subjects to which special attention shall be paid:

the natural composition of the land and its products;

the origin and blood relationships of the inhabitants, the languages with regard to their dialects, legends, songs, etc.;

the history of the people, their princes, aristocratic families, and towns;

the old system of regional administration, and later, the judicial system;

the churches;

property and assets;

civil liberties, guilds and other societies, matters related to trades, farms and other agricultural establishments;

legal practices, customs, festivals;

the progress and accomplishments of the sciences and arts, description of all manner of antiquities; everything that can serve in delineating as accurate and complete an image as possible of the state of the fatherland in the different eras, and in elaborating the general transitions from one situation into another according to their causes and effects.

The society will be concerned above all with the collection and, insofar as this is possible, the preservation of old artifacts and documents, and also wishes to direct the individual members' attention to this subject.

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