

Editors' Introduction

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Abstract

This module offers a selection of texts, images, and audiovisual materials pertaining to the history of knowledge and education in Germany from about 1500 to the present. We begin by reflecting on the “history of knowledge” as a research field. This includes describing its origins and unfolding, and its analytical intentions. Then we lay out the basic principles and criteria guiding the present collection of primary sources. Finally, we make recommendations on using the collection in research and teaching.

The “History of Knowledge” as a Research Field

The history of ideas has been a lively topic of inquiry since the development of modern academic methods in the nineteenth century. Focused on the great theories and discoveries of the human experience, and on the pioneering men and women who brought them to light, the history of ideas drew on the contention that all knowledge is cumulative and therefore progressive in nature.^[1] But the history of ideas is not quite the same as the history of knowledge, which until the early 1990s “was regarded as an exotic or even an eccentric topic.”^[2] The history of knowledge is a more broadly contextualized and multidisciplinary endeavor. Located at the nexus of fields such as sociology, anthropology, and the history of science, and alert to growing skepticism about the objectivity and linearity of knowledge claims, the history of knowledge has moved to the center of historical interest in recent decades. It has been propelled there by multiple forces. Sociologists working in the tradition of Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) and Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), for example, have advanced the idea of “situated” knowledge. Proponents of the idea believe that knowledge as such tells us little. In order to understand what knowledge means to the different groups of people who encounter it, knowledge has to be comprehended in light of the social, institutional, and cultural conditions in which it is produced and circulated, since these conditions shape and, in fact, significantly determine meaning.^[3] Historians of science, meanwhile, have expanded their work beyond the study of the scientific disciplines and their various practitioners, narrowly defined, to explore questions such as how notions of objectivity and proof were embedded in political, cultural, and even linguistic contexts that themselves prefigured how those notions were articulated. The recognition that seemingly neutral and eternal concepts such as “objectivity” and “proof” are historically constructed made it possible to embrace not only great ideas and the thinkers behind them, but also a widening array of knowledge locations, practices, and actors.^[4] It follows, then, that this shift in perspective, which focuses on knowledge (or knowledges) as situated and negotiated in various contexts, applies to both the “content” of knowledge and the structures and conventions that shape, define, and propagate it.

In a helpful programmatic essay on the field’s intentions, the Swiss historian Philipp Sarasin characterizes the history of knowledge as an “approach that focuses on the social production and circulation of knowledge.” This approach rests upon two key assumptions. First, that knowledge “circulates between people and groups,” refusing to remain within tight social or spatial limits. This assumption invites historians to examine the full spectrum of individuals upon whom knowledge may or may not have impinged. Second, that “knowledge is a historical phenomenon and can be treated by us exclusively as such, that is, not with respect to the question of whether particular states of knowledge at some point are true or false, better or worse, useful or not.” Instead, Sarasin continues, the field looks at “the social carriers, forms, and contexts in which knowledge appears or disappears, as

well as its effects.”^[5] This assumption, grounded in the aforementioned skepticism regarding objectivity, opens up analytical space for historians to study simply how knowledge has functioned in social settings, which is itself an interesting subject of inquiry. This new “frame of thinking” has the benefit of offsetting the materialistic and economic tendencies of social history with a dynamic cultural-historical approach that is socially centered but alive to the personalities, practices, languages, and dissemination media of knowledge in all their diversity.^[6]

The history of knowledge (*Wissensgeschichte*) is thus a new way of framing a set of traditional questions. This reframing is having a positive effect on related disciplines. As a matrix of research, the history of knowledge occupies the intersection of a growing number of fields: sociology, anthropology, and the history of science, as previously mentioned, but also social history, the history of the book, cultural history, migration history, and others. These fields have all undergone transformations in recent decades, expanding their areas of inquiry, questioning older hierarchies, and interrogating power relationships, especially those concerning gender, race, religion, and social class. In certain instances, a history of knowledge approach has further aided the development of these fields, pushing them in promising new directions. For example, the history of state power in imperial zones has been written many times, but recent studies have started examining the information gathering practices of “knowledge workers” in those zones, presenting them as important and revealing tools and/or manifestations of state power.^[7] We have long been familiar with the contents of domestic floral, faunal, and taxidermy collections, but new studies explain how these collections, far from being static or merely decorative, transformed homes into sites of knowledge in their own right, with wide-ranging implications for family power dynamics and local discussions regarding proper schooling.^[8] Perhaps the most astonishing development concerns the status of religion. Whereas older studies presented religions as incapable of knowledge production, new literature insists that religions must be taken seriously as legitimate knowledge structures and that their adherents, by extension, must be recognized as legitimate knowers.^[9] This more accommodating perspective sheds light on how historical knowledge structures related to one another and how knowers, in all their guises and whatever their commitments, produced, bore, translated, and circulated knowledge as they situated themselves within an increasingly crowded and contested marketplace of ideas.

It remains unclear how these disparate studies, which tend to focus on discrete periods, places, concepts, and practices, could substantiate an overarching theory of the history of knowledge. Still, Simone Lässig offers helpful thoughts on the subject. Showing how a history of knowledge approach can help answer questions about immigration and integration in early twentieth-century America, she writes that “a new history of knowledge—which in principle should focus on the *histories* of knowledge—cannot avoid taking a broad spectrum of forms of knowledge into consideration. That spectrum stretches from knowledge acquired through everyday experience to the knowledge of artists, craftspeople, and skilled workers, from administrative and entrepreneurial expertise to the knowledge of academic scholars and scientists.”^[10] She further notes three important aspects of the history of knowledge as a method of study that bear upon its analytical utility. First, knowledge understood socially “compels historians to rethink the complex relationship between structure and agency.” Second, the history of knowledge radically expands our understanding of what constitutes knowledge, since it includes as targets of study everything from canonical knowledge, such as knowledge pertaining to “science,” to even lost, precarious, and clandestine knowledge, as well as ignorance. Third, the method concedes that “knowledge has never been solely a force for emancipation,” the persistent claim going back to Plato notwithstanding. This concession challenges the field’s practitioners to explore knowledge, however it was experienced, in a wide range of historical contexts.^[11] Altogether, then, this flexible method speaks imaginatively to various areas of historic academic concern while opening up new vistas within related disciplines.

The Collection: Contents and Organization

In organizing this collection of primary source texts, images, and audiovisual materials, we entertained various guiding considerations. First, covering the vast period since 1500 required judiciousness in choosing materials; our collection makes claim to relevance and accessibility, but not to depth or comprehensiveness. Second, since this module is part of the larger *German History Intersections* project, many of our choices were informed by the project's two other modules, namely Germanness and Migration. Knowing that students would have access to additional materials relating to those themes, we felt free to leave some important areas of German knowledge and education unaddressed, e.g., migrant knowledge. A third selection criterion was availability. Otherwise put, we favored items that were not readily available (or likely to be included) in other, open-access primary source collections. We were undeterred in presenting the esoteric and unusual in those instances where relevance or sheer interest-value prevailed. One final consideration was achieving a balance between sources dedicated to “knowledge,” on the one hand, and “education,” on the other. As a rule, we did not draw strict distinctions between the two concepts. But since the history of German education has already been studied and documented so extensively, especially at the secondary and post-secondary levels, we did not feel compelled to fully represent the institutional history of education in this collection. While we did not discount the value of certain key episodes, texts, or institutions in the history of German education, we chose to prioritize other concerns, including those with the potential to broaden readers' understanding of the manifold realms in which “knowledge” could be produced, evaluated, and transmitted.

On the basis of these considerations, we set about our work. We proceeded not with the principal goal of establishing a theoretical grounding for the field. Instead, we aimed to develop a framework of categories for organizing the vast sources available to us. Over time, we whittled these down to ten:

1. Sites of Knowledge
2. Practices of Knowledge
3. Knowledge Workers and Networks of Knowledge
4. Clandestine and Tacit Knowledge
5. Conflicts and Controversies of Knowledge
6. Knowledge of Nature
7. Knowledge of the Body and Anthropology
8. Technologies of Knowledge
9. Social and Humanistic Knowledge
10. Popularizing Knowledge

These ten categories helped us locate and organize our sources. Some of the categories, whose meanings were seemingly straightforward, helped us generate unexpected ideas. “Sites of Knowledge,” for example, led us not only to the classic examples (schools, museums, laboratories, and academies), but also pushed us to think about households, cloisters, libraries for the blind, and zoos. Likewise, “Conflicts and Controversies of Knowledge” yielded sources not only in predictable areas, such as church-state and liberal-conservative political relations, but also in male-female and elite-subaltern relations.

We also became aware of thematic and conceptual overlaps between and among our categories. For example, “Knowledge of Nature,” “Knowledge of the Body and Anthropology,” and “Social and Humanistic Knowledge” all function as important independent categories. At the same time, however, they also refer to domains of knowledge—nature, the body, and the social and human sciences—that interpenetrate one another in a variety of historical contexts. “Practices of Knowledge,” “Technologies of Knowledge,” and “Popularizing Knowledge” are

distinct and yet relatable to the production and circulation of knowledge. “Practices of Knowledge” includes activities such as collecting, observing, and quantifying. “Technologies of Knowledge” subsumes these practices but focuses on the tools pertinent to them, such as printing presses, microscopes, and computers. “Popularizing Knowledge” is impossible to understand without reference to the practices and technologies that characterize the type of knowledge being popularized. “Knowledge Workers and Networks of Knowledge,” “Clandestine and Tacit Knowledge,” and “Conflicts and Controversies of Knowledge” also fit together, for they foreground the specifically social nature of knowledge. The emphasis on knowledge workers and their networks uncovers the ways in which even “high” intellectual endeavor, such as scientific astronomy, occurred in social settings shaped by prefigured concepts, prescriptive languages of evaluation, and the mediating participation of all sorts of authorities, tools, and assistants. This thick social webbing, furthermore, levels the ground of intellectual action, allowing us to recognize the significance of all types of knowers and their practices. Once peasants are seen as producers and consumers of (agricultural) knowledge—as knowers who deserve, as a matter of historical inquiry, to be placed on a par with university professors and clinicians—then we come to appreciate how nearly every member of society engages with a much broader sphere of knowledge activity than is commonly assumed. The invocation of clandestine knowledge likewise serves to emphasize the social and political settings of knowledge, whereas tacit knowledge, which, as a concept, proved remarkably stubborn in generating useable primary sources, speaks to assumptions and practices that were perhaps unreflected in their own contexts. Finally, “Conflicts of Knowledge” highlights the often contentious question of what constitutes knowledge. Such conflicts may likewise be found across all of the nine other categories. They run the gamut from “volcanism” debates over the earth’s geological history to the role of the state in confessional relations to the mobilization of knowledge by the state for the purposes of political repression. In observing how our topics “intersected” with and complemented one another, we came to realize that the history of modern German knowledge possesses a certain internal integrity, however selective the contents of the present source collection may be.

Having established the general categories, we then compiled lists of topics or terms that each category encompassed. For example, under “Practices of Knowledge,” we listed: observing, collecting, quantifying, qualifying, analyzing, criticizing, speculating, experimenting, classifying, and administering knowledge. The terms listed under “Knowledge Workers” were even more wide-ranging: teachers, farmers, priests, pastors, rabbis, government filing clerks, court amanuenses, surgeons, alchemists, government spies, propagandists, librarians, encyclopedists, translators, expedition members, missionaries, mapmakers, nudists, “experts,” computer hackers, etc. Equipped with these lists of terms and topics, each contributor, working within his or her area of research expertise (but without any strict limits), set off to find pertinent sources. Our research suggested that some topics, such as schools and libraries, needed to be mentioned multiple times to address developments across long spans of time. Other topics, such as early modern “curiosity cabinets,” *fin-de-siècle* animal menageries, and postwar sexuality “atlases,” make justifiable but singular appearances in the collection.

Using the Collection

We have outlined our working methods in part to emphasize that there is no prescribed way to use this collection. Unlike a course reader or certain primary source document anthologies, our collection imposes no underlying narrative or synoptic view. In many cases, the sources will demonstrate readily apparent connections to the history of knowledge and education, as with the materials relating to archives, museums, libraries, and schools. In other cases, however, the connection may be less evident, as with the article on sugar beets or the photograph of milk cans buried in a cellar in the Warsaw Ghetto. In those instances, especially, readers will want to refer to the accompanying abstracts and captions, which range in substance and tone from purely descriptive to intentionally pedagogical.

On the whole, we aimed for a free and flexible approach. We hope that readers will engage with the ten chosen categories and that, in doing so, they will make their own unique discoveries and identify avenues for further exploration. The collection is thus intended both as a source of edification and as a stimulus to research and reading. The featured excerpts from a seventeenth-century midwives' manual, for example, might prompt questions about similar manuals published in subsequent eras. Alternatively, that same manual might spur entirely different lines of inquiry. The manual in question was written in dialogic form by a well-known midwife to aristocrats. How many other women were writing in the medical realm in this era or others? How effective or common was the dialogic form in broader didactic literature? Selections from Günter Gaus's 1964 television interview with Hannah Arendt shed light on her own educational history and convey her ideas about the role of political theorists in society. At the same time, the interview also prompts questions about the role of television in the popularization of "high" intellectual culture in the twentieth century. It also invites comparisons: how did that medium differ from others both before and after it? Similarly, the text and video excerpts about the "Frankfurt Kitchen" (1927) can also be approached from a variety of angles. The text excerpts explain how architects and designers made use of rational design principles to reduce the labor involved in meal preparation. The video aims to both educate contemporary consumers and to popularize the vision and intentions behind this groundbreaking reconfiguration of the modern kitchen. At the same time, the video also makes clear that labor in both the old and the new kitchen required explicit as well as tacit knowledge, reminding us that domestic labor is also part of the history of knowledge. This observation may prompt additional questions about tacit knowledge in other eras and facets of the household economy.

Approaching the collection imaginatively yields other interpretative advantages as well. An entry on Alsace-Lorraine from the 1903 edition of the popular encyclopedia *Meyers großes Konversations-Lexikon* shows, first of all, how historical knowledge about this contested territory was mobilized as part of a nationalistic and military project in the decades following the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871). By extension, the article also shows how a seemingly neutral encyclopedia—a medium of middle-class education and a marker of respectability—could become a vehicle for state propaganda. Entries from sailor Heinrich Zimmerman's private journal (1781) from his time as a crew member on James Cook's third voyage (1776–1780) document the participation of Germans in extra-European exploration and attest to the practical knowledge needed by common sailors to survive. But the text also raises questions about the German market for accounts of overseas travel to exotic lands, topics that may be pursued through other items both in this collection and beyond. These are just a few examples of the various perspectives that may be brought to bear on any one of these sources—and we trust that there are many more such examples awaiting discovery!

While we have every expectation that readers will use these sources freely, including in relation to other national histories of knowledge, we would like to conclude by highlighting a few salient themes in the present collection that speak to the peculiarities of a uniquely "German" history of knowledge. The first of these themes is the persistent movement of knowledge across social boundaries. Therefore, sources addressing the elite production of knowledge by professors, states, religious authorities, and the like, are juxtaposed with popular sources to demonstrate that knowledge travelled in multiple directions at once. A second theme is the dissemination of scientific and technical ways of knowing. The extent of this dissemination is certainly evident in the German lands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is important to emphasize, however, that earlier eras revealed a similarly "egalitarianized" circulation of such knowledge. This, too, commands attention. A third salient theme is the enduring relevance of religious knowledge as well as religiously-situated knowledge. The former might be characterized as knowledge concerning doctrine, practice, and sacred texts. The latter—religiously situated or inflected knowledge—speaks not only to long-standing religious pluralism in the German lands, but also to the

wide range of religious institutions, associations, and discourses of coexistence and conflict that played such vital roles in all aspects of German life throughout the period covered by this module. Our sources reveal the centrality of reading in German-Jewish culture; alternatively, they also show how the study of mollusks could be construed as an imperative of Protestant piety and how perceptions of educational attainment could determine the social destinies of Catholics.

In the end, the question of whether there was a distinctively “German” history of knowledge can only be answered in relation to the perennial concerns of German history. With this collection, we hope to stress that the history of knowledge in Germany at once partakes of and sheds new light on the larger conflicts that have shaped German history, including but not limited to the religious disputes of the Reformation era, scientific and social controversies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the totalitarian and genocidal politics of the mid-twentieth century, and the contested culture and politics of the postwar era. The first category in this collection, “Sites of Knowledge,” seeks to capture the diversity of spaces in which knowledge production, consumption, and circulation occurs. But in the broadest sense, this collection proposes “Germany” itself as a “site of knowledge,” and thus invites students and scholars to think about the ways in which a history of knowledge approach can lead us to reconsider some of the classic problems of German historiography. This reconsideration will take seriously the perspectives and voices of new arrivals to the German “site of knowledge,” which itself focuses attention on German identity and the movement of peoples within, across, and beyond German boundaries. So it is here, in exploring how ways of knowing intersect with questions of Germanness and migration—to invoke the other two modules in the *German History Intersections* project—that any “German” history of knowledge must begin.

Notes

[1] Charles Van Doren, *A History of Knowledge: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), xv-xxv.

[2] Peter Burke, *What Is the History of Knowledge?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016), 2.

[3] *Ibid.*, 9-11.

[4] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007). Earlier efforts in this direction are reflected in the title of biologist Ludwik Fleck’s study of “Denkstil” or “thought style”: Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). Original: Ludwik Fleck, *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache: Einführung in die Lehre vom Denkstil und Denkkollektiv* (Basel: B. Schwabe, 1935).

[5] Philipp Sarasin, “Was ist Wissensgeschichte?” *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 36, Nr. 1 (2011): 159-172; 164-65: “Grundsätzlich lässt sich sagen, dass mit diesem Ansatz [...] die gesellschaftliche Produktion und Zirkulation von Wissen untersucht werden soll [...] Wissen ist ein historisches Phänomen und wird von uns ausschließlich als solches behandelt, das heißt: nicht hinsichtlich der Frage, ob bestimmte Wissensbestände nun wahr oder falsch, besser oder schlechter, nützlich oder unnützlich sind, sondern nur: wie, wann und gegebenenfalls warum ein bestimmtes Wissen auftaucht – und wieder verschwindet. Ferner: welche Effekte es hat, in welchen Zusammenhängen es funktioniert, wer seine Träger sind, in welchen Formen es erscheint.”

[6] Sarasin, 172.

[7] For example, Arndt Brendecke, *Imperium und Empirie: Funktionen des Wissens in der spanischen Kolonialherrschaft* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2009); Arndt Brendecke, *The Empirical Empire: Spanish Colonial Rule and the Politics of Knowledge*, trans. Jeremiah Riemer (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2016); and Jacob Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor: University of

Michigan Press, 2009).

[8] For example, Philip Ball, *Curiosity: How Science Became Interested in Everything* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[9] Burke, *What Is the History of Knowledge?* 7.

[10] Simone Lässig, "The History of Knowledge and the Expansion of the Historical Research Agenda," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 59 (Fall 2016): 43. Available online at:

<https://perspectivia.net/publikationen/bulletin-washington/2016-59/0029-0058>

[11] *Ibid.*, 44-7.

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