

DR ANNIKA MOMBAUER INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Max Easterman

My name's Max Easterman and it's my pleasure to introduce you to the Goethe Institut's latest pair of DOPPELGÄNGER. It's a great way to find out about the lives and work of Germans and Britons today.... Each time we interview two people from the same profession in each country – someone in the UK who's worked in Germany, and a German who's worked in the same job in Britain.

Our Doppelgänger in this edition are HISTORIANS. Historians are in focus at the moment. 2014 is a year of anniversaries: the 75th anniversary of the start of the Second World War; 25 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall; and exactly 300 years since the Hanoverians came to the throne, since when Britain's royal family has been, well, yes, German. Perhaps most importantly, it's the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War about which there has been a raft of new history books, new interpretations and analysis. But, more than that, the First World War is shining a spotlight on the historians themselves – and how they still can't reach any consensus on how and why it started.

DR ANNIKA MOMBAUER grew up in the Ruhr district of Germany and studied history at the University of Münster, before coming to the UK to take her doctorate at the University of Sussex. And she's now Senior Lecturer in Modern European History at the Open University. She's published a number of important books and papers on the origins of the First World War and on German Imperial history.

Annika Mombauer, before we tackle the 1914-18 war and all that comes after it, I'd like to talk more generally about history and historians, and in particular, why are you, a German historian, teaching history in England.

Annika Mombauer

Well, partly, I think, it is because I always had a love for everything English. Ever since coming here when I was 14 for a language holiday I couldn't really think of anywhere else I'd rather be. So, as you said, I did go to the University of Münster for a short while and I studied Anglistik there and history. And I thought that that way I could combine my love of English with my love of history, but I found studying Anglistik somewhat stifling and so I thought I would rather be in England and do what I really loved which was study history, so that's what I did.

Max Easterman

And what about the interpretation of history...is it interpreted differently in the two countries?

Annika Mombauer

Certainly when I came here the difference between university teaching was immense in that here you had very small tutorial groups and you knew who your tutor was and your tutor knew you – and that was a huge difference to how I experienced studying history at Münster, where you were really just one of many. It differed also in the way that in Germany you were taught the basics very much, it is very much – or it was then – a model where you needed to become a scholar and you needed to know about ancient history and about Mediaeval history, and you needed to be able to read a papyrus or a Roman coin. Whereas when you then went to the university here, you could specialise in just being a modern historian. You have none of those other skills, which – arguably – you don't need for your day job, but they do make a more rounded scholar. So I think the German system was much more thorough in that way and also much more difficult, I felt.

Max Easterman

Is there a difference between Germany and Britain in the way history is approached, how it's interpreted, how the facts as opposed to the themes are dealt with?

Annika Mombauer

I don't think there is a difference now. There certainly was a difference if you look back into the 20th century, particularly regarding the question about the origins of the First World War where some historians certainly were in the pay of the government and were perhaps able to misinterpret the facts rather than to interpret the facts, as they presented themselves.

This was in the wake of the First World War when Germans were very unhappy with the Treaty of Versailles and with the idea that it had been Germany's fault that the war had started and that now, as they have lost, they also had to pay for the damage that they had caused. This was never believed in Germany and successive governments after 1919 made it their mission to prove to the world that the Treaty of Versailles had been wrong. And the way they go about doing that is by employing historians and funding historians to advocate this version, this revisionist version of history. And so publications that didn't conform to this were basically censored and historians who worked towards undoing the war guilt lie were favoured and sponsored by the government. And you get various institutions that are set up, special journals that are founded – all with the explicit aim of proving to the world that Germany had not started the war.

And where it gets difficult, of course, is then when different historians advance different versions of the truth. It would be quite difficult for the public to make sense of that, which is what we are seeing right now with the very public debate around the First World War in Britain and in Germany. It's been consumed by people who have probably never seen a primary source or who might even never have read a history book, but they are still having to take at face value what historians are telling them.

Max Easterman

And the historians, as you say, are telling them entirely different things in some cases. Some are saying that it was Germany's fault and others are saying "well, no, it was kind of a mistake, everybody sort of stumbled forward into this war, this huge world war without realising they were doing it." Now, is it possible to reconcile those views as an ordinary citizen?

Annika Mombauer

I don't think it is. Interestingly, just on my way here, in the taxi, I was talking to the taxi driver about that and he said: "You know, everybody knows about the Second World War. It was all about fighting the Nazis and it was all a good thing, but who knows why the First World War started? I can't make any sense of it." And I think that is very true. Now the debate around the origins of the war is a hundred year debate and it's become so complex and so convoluted

Max Easterman

So how do you and your students then deal with that? With this vast, complex amount of information?

Annika Mombauer

Well, I'm quite lucky because students at the Open University tend to be more mature students who already come equipped with quite a lot of knowledge from elsewhere, so they tend to be able to deal quite well with thinking about debates, if you like. But at the end of the day they don't really want debates, they want, as I think most students do, at least when they start out, they enjoy reading all the different arguments, but at the end of the day they get a bit frustrated – "what actually did happen, you know? How can I, as an undergraduate student, ever come to grips with the amount of material that these historians whose work I'm reading clearly have come to grips with"; and with a topic like this where there is a whole library, really, full of writing on the origins of the First World War, You really have to say to a student "well, you can't come to grips with it, at the end of the day you have to make almost like a gut instinct decision based on whose argument you find the most convincing

Max Easterman

So does this plethora of information, not just perhaps on the Great War, but on a lot of 20th century events make it much more difficult to teach history, perhaps, in a constructive way?

Annika Mombauer

Well, I think it's a double-edged sword. Having all that information, particularly having the information online, having whole world of source out there, if you like, primary and secondary sources that students can access as they wish, is both an enrichment of what is available for them, but also makes teaching much more difficult, because you never know what they are going to find...and one of the difficulties, I think, particularly in history, for students is to be able to evaluate a source that they find or a website that they use and see whether it's respectable, for want of a better word, or not, because not everything that they find will actually help them, whereas, I guess, 50 years ago that would have been much easier, because you would have had your journal articles and you would have had your monographs – and not so many of those either – so it was a much more manageable body of knowledge that you would try and impart to your students, whereas now it is beyond the grasp of any individual.

Max Easterman

I have the impression that British people don't view the First World War with the same animosity against the Germans as the Second World War.

Annika Mombauer I think the relationship that the British have with those two wars is very different. The First World War looms large in the public perception and has always, I think, been regarded as the more significant of the two wars, partly that is because in terms of military losses it was much more significant. You could argue that in terms of civilian casualties the Second World War obviously was more grave for Germany, but, I think, the impression that people have of the futility of the war, people say, and of the tragedy of that war, the horror of the trenches – that is a very British perception of the war that is not shared in Germany or, for example, in France. The idea that you could argue that the war had been futile in France would be ridiculous. It was in no way a futile war and the sacrifices were worth making. Of course I don't think the war was futile for Britain and it's a very contemporary debate that we are having at the moment in the British press: was the war futile or not? To my mind Britain had no choice but to intervene in that war.

Max Easterman

So you don't agree with the historians who are saying right now "Britain should have stepped back from it, Britain should have kept out of it. It could have coped with a German victory and dealt with that later on its own terms."

Annika Mombauer

Absolutely not. I think that argument underestimates what German foreign policy was all about in 1914 and it underestimates the really difficult position that Britain found itself in July 1914, really between a rock and a hard place, because you have on one hand to consider what will happen to Britain if we don't intervene and Germany wins and if you look at, for example, the so-called "September Programme" for 9th of September 1914 when German Chancellor pens down some of the war aims that he envisages for Germany at the point when the war is going really well and it looks like they might win. Those war aims basically foresee a Europe entirely dominated by Germany. So if Britain stays out of the war and Germany wins, you have got Germans all along the coast of the Channel ready perhaps to strike at Britain once they have recovered their strength. But you also have to consider, if you don't enter the war, you are leaving Russia and France in the lurch. Now what happens if they win? What will they do to you next?

Max Easterman

People in Britain have always referred to the First World War as the Great War,. Now, I have the impression that's not how Germans see it.

Annika Mombauer

Well, it's very difficult, I guess, to use that terminology if you've lost the war. I think there is always as well that to consider. How do you view an event if you emerge as a victor, how do you view an event if you are defeated? So in that sense to call it the Great War might not have been so apt. And, as I said, for the longest time the First World War in Germany was really of no real significance because it had been overshadowed so, so much by the Second World War, which was even worse than the First World War had been. But just recently I've noticed that Germans do refer to it as the Great War. They call it der Grosse Krieg. I have the Münkler's book, for example, which was published in the Autumn of 2013 and is called Der Grosse Krieg and now when you read German newspapers you see that term being used all the time.

Max Easterman

There are many events in Britain in 2014 to commemorate or possibly even to celebrate the First World War and yet there seems to be emerging a political consensus that says "we mustn't tread on the Germans' toes...we mustn't mention the War,

Annika Mombauer

Yes, I guess in a sense it's not so much "don't mention the war" as "don't mention the origins of the war". There is this drive to commemorate the war, but it's very politically awkward to talk about why was Britain fighting this war in the first place, why was Britain fighting against Germany, when now Germany is so important in Europe and you don't want to tread on anyone's toes, as you say. But it's more complicated than that, because there's debates within Britain as to how to best commemorate this war

without it being jingoistic or nationalistic and with it being sensitive enough to the different needs of different people, remembering as well. And it's pitted historians against the government in an interesting way, because the government's approach – initially it at least – was to commemorate all the battles that Britain lost. And military historians then said "Hang on a minute, we actually did win the war and we did win some of the battles along the way. Can we please commemorate those as well, like, for example the Battle of Amiens". You've got a debate here between the government and historians, which is very interesting. But at the same time in Germany there is absolutely nothing planned by the government, which is the other side of the coin and perhaps it's understandable if you've lost the war and if perhaps you started the war. It is difficult to know how to commemorate it, but I think it's actually really shocking that there is no attempt by the German government to commemorate a war that cost so many lives and that led to such tragedy in Germany. So what you get is local initiatives commemorating the war, in the Rheinland or the war in Bavaria or whatever it might be, because there is clearly a need to remember that war. But from the German government, there is nothing.

Max Easterman

Angela Merkel actually said we have no national historical policy - "Wir haben keine Nationalgeschichtspolitik". Why is that?

Annika Mombauer

Well, I have no idea, you'd have to ask Angela Merkel, but what I do know is that historians in Germany feel very sore about this and they've been asking for several years: "what are your plans, what are you going to do? 2014 will come sooner than you think" to then be told: "well, we are not doing anything" or "we will just wait and react and see what the others are doing". Well, the others are spending millions, millions of euros on various commemorative events. I think in France you won't be able to move for re-enactments, commemorative events. Perhaps that's taking it too far, I'm not sure how I feel about re-enactments, but for Germany to not have any national remembrance plans I think is pretty poor.

Max Easterman

Annika Mombauer, thank you very much indeed.

Annika Mombauer

Thank you.