



Alumni Interview

... Please tell us briefly about yourself and your research focus during your Postdoc stay at the IEG.

My name is Michael Geyer. My research focus during my stay at the IEG was to prepare my thesis, “Aufrüstung oder Sicherheit: Die Reichswehr in der Krise der Machtpolitik 1924-1936” for publication. However, I spent most of my time researching the essay on “Militär, Militarismus” for Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe.

... What inspired you to choose your specific research topic?

Well, I wish the inspiration had been to figure out how a demilitarized Germany with its 100,000 men army could be fit into the Weimar Republic and into an emerging Europe of Nations. Somehow this was on my mind, but I sure could not formulate it at the time. As it was, my inspiration were two Hauptseminare, one with Andreas Hillgruber, my future Doktorvater, and the other one with Gottfried Schramm on World War I. In hindsight it may surprise, but I took away from the Hillgruber seminar the importance of nationalism in radicalizing and brutalizing warfare and the destructive potential of colonial warfare in SWAfrica. Two new books had just come out on the subject, one in the GDR and one in the BRD. The Schramm Seminar impressed on me the importance of the Eastern Front – and, above all, the excitement of thinking “out of the box.” My Russian teacher at the time was Gernot Erler, who much later became State Secretary in the Auswärtige Amt.

... What motivated you to pursue a Postdoc at the IEG after your PhD?

If there was motivation, it was not to be unemployed. But this was the old university, and motivation was not the issue. There was some suggestion that I might get the position of an Assistent, but when that fell through (or was a rumor in the first place), a temporary position as a postdoc was found for me in Mainz. My first steps on my own were some forty-odd applications, and I guess I won the lottery, a postdoc at St. Antony's College in Oxford (1976-1977). This is also the reason why I spent just half a year (February-September 1976) in Mainz.

... When you think about your time at the IEG, what is the first memory that comes to your mind?

My first and most enduring memory is NOISE. I hope the main traffic artery that wound its way around the Institute has been moved (or the windows have been updated), but rush-hour traffic was huge and incredibly noisy. And, inasmuch as the FAZ is trustworthy about German work fatigue today, it is worth recalling that back then it was “Es wird wieder in die Hände gespuht ...” starting at 6 o'clock in the morning. Otherwise, it was the pleasure of good company, though there wasn't that much socializing among postdocs at the time. Still, it was an international community with very diverse research topics, which introduced me to worlds I was not familiar with. While I broke out of my dissertation-stupor only in Oxford, the initial cracks in the veneer occurred in Mainz.

... How did your Postdoc time at the IEG prepare you for the next stages of your career?

The main preparation for the future in the short time I was in Mainz came with the recognition that I should not overreach; that is, do two things at the same time. Writing the Militarism essay and revising the dissertation at the same time was just too much. But it turns out, I never heeded my own insight.



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... What do you still appreciate about your time at the IEG, even years later?

This is a good place to repay old debts and to recall the work which Claus Scharf, one of the assistants at the Institute, did in readying my manuscript for publication. Back then, this was a massive cut-and-paste job, and he did the exacting work that I should have done. But by the time the book was readied for print, I was already beyond Oxford in the United States and busy preparing my first lecture courses.

The other enduring memory is Professor Karl Otmar Freiherr von Aretin (1918-1981), the director of the IEG at the time. It is his personality – his quiet energy, his firm sense of self, his irony, and his appreciative, but always skeptical view of his postdoctoral fold – that left an enduring impression. He was my role model as a professor, though I grew up in and grew into quite different worlds. Maybe, it's simply the memory of a German world, which was destroyed by the Nazis and whose remnants disappeared in my lifetime. And perhaps, this appreciation comes to me only now in New York in 2025, experiencing a similar process.

... Did you have any favorite places in Mainz to write or do research?

Mainz barely existed for me at the time. But obviously, I had a splendid view of the Mainz Cathedral from my window, and it is stuck in my mind. Currently, my favorite place is the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek in Frankfurt.

... If you could return to the IEG today, what would you want to work on now?

I would want to work on a family history of my late wife, Miriam Hansen, née Bratu, and somewhat tongue-in-cheek I would want to write it as a „Kleine Geschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert“ – a history of a family in the German mainstream, which time and again decides to swim against the stream.

... What did your dream career look like back then and how did reality turn out?

Now, that's an interesting question because my actual career exceeded my dreams by far. So, I didn't become a baker, but that's unsurprising – except that I wanted to become a baker rather than a pilot. However, after rejecting any insinuation to become a priest, the other time-honored option for an intelligent boy from a small town was to become lawyer or teacher, and I wanted to become a Gymnasium teacher. Next, to my total surprise I was nominated by an Akademischer Rat, Dr. Mielitz, for the Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes – and got it, which gave me some ideas that I might have an academic career. But then I ended up in Mainz and Oxford, and was encouraged by a friend from the archives, Isabel Hull (now Professor Emerita at Cornell), to apply for an assistant professor job at the University of Michigan (which she had rejected in favor of Cornell), which I got. From then on, there was no way back, but in the first place this was because nobody asked me to come back. Finally in 1985, I published this essay, which hardly anyone read except some historians at the University of Chicago who liked it. The history faculty chose to hire me as Professor of German and European History. And that was that, a dream career.

... What advice would you hand to new researchers considering staying at the IEG?

Stay with it and trust your luck – which, I agree, is not good advice.