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The Max Planck Institute for History: The Heimpel Era

Preprint 2

Abstract

The Max Planck Institute for History, which was opened on 13 July 1957 in Göttingen in the presence of Federal President Theodor Heuss, plays a special role in the history of the MPG. It was one of the first institutes for the humanities, following the institutes for international and private law and the Bibliotheca Hertziana, and also, with never more than twenty scholars, one of the smallest. Nonetheless, in its fifty years existence it has had such substantial influence that its closure in 2006 attracted a great deal of attention, also internationally. Even today the books and papers produced by this institute continue to be emphasized as innovative and quoted in important professional discussions. On the basis of archival material in the MPG archive but also in the Federal Archive in Koblenz, the University Archive in Heidelberg, and the German Literature Archive in Marbach, the preprint gives a sketch of the origins and the evolution of the MPI for History during the “era” of its first director, Hermann Heimpel. Beginning as a rather traditional research institute focused on German mediaeval history, preparing scholarly editions and bibliographies, the institute moved rapidly forward, the modern history department being a driving force of innovation. Especially due to the winning of Dietrich Gerhard, a German émigré teaching at Washington University in Saint Louis, as “department head” and later scholarly member of the MPG, the institute opened up to questions critical of the tradition and to international contacts in a way that was very atypical at the time. Heimpel’s and Gerhard’s successors, Josef Fleckenstein and Rudolf Vierhaus, took up these impulses and transformed the MPI for History to one of the most important centers of scholarly innovation in the field of historical research.

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