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Studying History In Europe

There can be little doubt about the desirability of the study of history in Europe. Just as Miami and San Diego provide better opportunities for the study of marine biology than the Rocky Mountains, universities in Heidelberg, Paris, and London can be more stimulating environments for the study of European history than American campuses. The main obstacle to study at a European university is often a lack of knowledge about what to expect in different European countries. Few individuals are aware that there are excellent universities which are frequently less expensive and often more accessible than many universities in the U. S. This note attempts to provide some insights into the European university system unavailable in existing travel guides as well as some information which may make the study of history in Europe more attractive to American students.

Germany—in olden days the country of “poets and thinkers” as Madame de Staël put it—still has a host of charming university towns. Heidelberg, Freiburg, Tübingen, Marburg, and Göttingen, which are all located in West Germany, once counted among the best such towns of the world. These so-called *romantischen universitäten* (translated as “picturesque universities”) have traditionally had good history departments. Other university towns also are strong in historical studies. Bielefeld, though not exactly a quaint town, has become a center for social history. Historians Wehler,

Kocka, and Koselleck, who teach there, count among Europe's foremost social historians. Berlin, where central European history was "made" between 1871 and 1945, is another center for historical studies, and Munich with its Institut für Zeitgeschichte offers excellent opportunities for people interested in the more recent past.

There is no hierarchy of German universities; the system is traditionally decentralized. Even though the university of Heidelberg is more famous than Hamburg, for example, there are no differences in their admission policies. All German universities are state universities, which means that they are under the authority of the ministry of culture of each German *lander* (state). Private universities are unknown in Germany, and state governments are thus in a position to exert ideological pressure to oust nonconformists or to deny them access to the universities. This is particularly true for Marxist scholars.

Despite such political influences, Germany is generally a country of academic freedom, and formal requirements, credit hours, and grade-point averages matter very little. German universities—in general very accessible to the American graduate student—are a haven for the scholar with focused interests. Definite scholarly interests and clear expectations are indispensable preconditions for a successful academic stay in Germany. Reading lists are rarely distributed, and there is very little academic guidance. German universities treat their undergraduates like mature scholars and assume self-motivation and direction. As a result, German seminars are by most standards too large and personal contact with other students leaves much to be desired. One is left to work on one's own most of the time. Thus, for a student who expects to be closely directed in his studies, German universities can be a source of unending ennui and moroseness. The social life familiar on an American campus is often missing, and the ostentatious cheerlessness of many German students, who superficially bear more resemblance to Raskolnikow than to an Oxford graduate, can be stultifying. Yet for self-motivated students contact with professors can help overcome this problem.

German professors, especially historians, have traditionally enjoyed tremendous social prestige. This prestige, however, has not always contributed to furthering communication between student and teacher. Like in American universities, self-veneration has become one of the salient characteristics of many German professors. Nonetheless, for the student who is prepared to show his interest openly and to participate actively in seminars these faculty idiosyncrasies can be overcome, and such a student will not be

isolated for very long. He may even be included in the *stammtisch*, an informal meeting of the professor and a few chosen students which is often a continuation of the seminar discussion in the more relaxed environment of a German pub.

As far as the practical aspects of study in Germany are concerned—applications, admissions, and living arrangements—German universities do not pose many problems. The chances for the American graduate student to gain admission to any one of the German universities are good. The application deadline for the fall semester is usually the previous mid-February. The student used to the exorbitant housing prices in many American cities will find accommodation in any German city moderately priced, even though there is a housing shortage in some of the smaller German university towns.

Unlike in Germany or in many other European countries, French intellectual life is centered in the French capital, Paris. Paris combines the characteristics of the American cities at Boston, New York, and Washington, or the English cities at London, Oxford, and Cambridge. "Paris, c'est la France" is all the more valid, if one talks about the study of the social sciences. At the Collège de France, Claude Levi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie give lectures and seminars which are open to the public. At the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales—still the breeding place for France's outstanding social historians—one can audit courses as an "occasional student." To register on a regular basis, however, is difficult even for the French, as the admission policy is very restrictive. This is unfortunately also true for the Institut d'Etudes Politiques, occasionally referred to as "Science Po," although it still maintains a few exchange programs with American universities.

The Parisian universities (Université Paris I through Université Paris XI) are considered to be second class institutions in comparison to the Grandes Ecoles. During the French Revolution the existing twenty-two universities were closed and henceforth all serious studies centered around the highly renowned Grandes Ecoles, the reputation of which still surpasses the universities by far. It was only in 1896 that the French universities were reestablished, and their main function since then has been to train school teachers for the French secondary school system. Even the world-famous Sorbonne, founded in the middle of the thirteenth century by Robert de Sorbon, does not constitute an exception to the rule; here too teaching is centered around the *cours*, a course of lectures in which the professor mostly reads his prepared text from the page. A major

consolation for anyone studying history at the university level is the Centre de Recherches Historiques, where scholars from the eleven Parisian universities hold their lectures and seminars. It suffices to be affiliated with any one of the Parisian universities to gain access to the Centre Historique.

Anyone who knows Paris only by hearsay will be surprised how inexpensive and entertaining life can be for a student in the French capital. For less than a dollar one can get a meal in one of the roughly ten Restaurants Universitaire. Anyone who wants to learn French and expects more than a little "fun" from his stay in Paris can find inexpensive accommodations in one of the over forty houses of the Cité Universitaire at the southern periphery of Paris. There one can find a tolerable room in one of the international dormitories. The American House (Fondation des Etats-Unis) is among the least recommended, since hardly any renovation work has been carried out there since the late 1920s, but the Maison Heinrich Heine, due to its intellectual ambiance and polite management, is especially attractive. If one prefers to live elsewhere in Paris, check the ads in *Le Figaro* or the *France-Soir*, the major papers. Small apartments are in relatively short supply, but with luck, perseverance, and about \$300, however, one will not remain long without a roof over his head.

Unlike in France and despite the weak pound, the fees at English universities are substantial. This is especially true because Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher raised the cost of education in order to keep unwanted British Commonwealth students out of England. The cost to attend a British university for one year has thus more than doubled since 1979. The high standard of English universities and the predominant position history occupies as a subject there, however, is a good enough reason to plan an extended stay in the United Kingdom if one can afford it. Apart from Oxford and Cambridge, both of which do not encourage a stay of less than one year, it is mainly the University of London with its many branches that recommends itself to the foreign student. There one can study a wide range of history. Moreover, in addition to Oxford, Cambridge, and the University of London there are about three dozen provincial universities, mostly founded in the second half of the nineteenth or in the early twentieth century. These primarily draw students from local surroundings.

Also in the British capital is an institution considered by many to be one of the foremost social science establishments in the world, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The name is misleading for the history student not interested in

economics also will feel at home here. A wide assortment of subjects in the social sciences are offered to students. International history, social history, as well as economic history and political theory are treated as independent subjects. A substantial part of the future elite of the British Commonwealth goes to school here, and probably no other place in the Anglo-Saxon world boasts as tightly woven a community of scholars as the LSE. Each "graduate student" (in England he will be referred to as a "postgraduate") has a personal tutor with whom he frequently discusses his academic progress, a process that enhances the sense of scholarly community. A considerable advantage of the LSE is that one can earn a masters degree in economic history, international history, or in a related social science in one year.

The LSE has a foreign student population of about forty percent. Even Russians, Poles, and students from mainland China attend the LSE, which in many ways constitutes a cross section of educated people from all over the world. Often one can find himself sitting at the same lunch table with students from Mauritius, Stockholm, Peking, and Vienna. This can make for stimulating conversations which can hardly be had elsewhere. Moreover, between two lectures one can easily get to a musical in the Drury Lane Theatre or to a play in the Savoy Theatre, both only a few minutes away from the school in the heart of London.

If one goes to the LSE there will be little need to look for accommodation in London (which is expensive and hard to find anyway) since the LSE has its own halls of residence. The best is Passfield Hall, named after Sidney Webb, who became Lord Passfield. He was one of the leaders of the Fabian Society and together with other Fabians, such as George Bernard Shaw, he was a major promoter of the school. Up to this very day the LSE retains its Fabian flavor and is consequently thought of as a "left wing" institution in the English academic landscape. This seems curious in view of the fact that most LSE departments are rather conservative in their politics.

Thus for the American student seeking to study history in Europe, the opportunities are rich and varied. The rewards from such study include not only contact with leading scholars and proximity to the areas where history was made, but cultural education as well.

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