

## Editorial

Dear readers,

it is my pleasure to welcome you to the newest issue of *History – Theory – Criticism*, 1/2025, which is dedicated mainly to biography. This topic comes to the pages of this journal exactly ten years after the first thematic section about theoretical aspects of biographical research was published in a Czech academic publication. While in 2015, there were three Czech contributions in the section of *Discussions and Disputes* [Diskuse a rozepře] under the title *Biografické přístupy na prahu 21. století* [Trends in Biography on the Threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century],<sup>1</sup> this issue broadens its scope and aims to present not only the Czech, but rather the Central and Eastern European perspective with the explicit link to the international scholarly community, which we managed to build in the last ten years. It all came into fruition in June 2024, when the group of this issue's authors met for the first time at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, to discuss this very topic at the workshop called *Biographical Research in Central and Eastern Europe: Traditions and Challenges*. As, then, an organiser of the event and today, a guest editor of this issue, I am pleased to present the participants' contributions to you.

The first essay from doctor Ákos Bartha (Eötvös Loránd University), “‘Non-significant’ Historical Figures and the Corrective Function of Biography,” offers not only an enticing insight into selected moments of Hungarian history, but it also further draws from two globally present theoretical concepts. First is the microhistorical notion of “exceptional normal cases” and its connection to the larger historical context, while the latter is the concept of “biography as a corrective,” coined by Nigel

<sup>1</sup> LENKA ŘEZNÍKOVÁ, *Biografie jako textová a sociální praxe. Ke konjunktuře žánru na prahu moderny*, *Dějiny – teorie – kritika* 12/2015, no. 1, pp. 93–117, <https://doi.org/10.14712/24645370.2715>; JIŘÍ ŠTAIF, *Psaní biografie a autor-ská sebereflexe*, *Dějiny – teorie – kritika* 12/2015, no. 1, pp. 118–123, <https://doi.org/10.14712/24645370.2716>; LUKÁŠ FASORA, *Politická biografie socialistických vůdců v zemích střední Evropy*, *Dějiny – teorie – kritika* 12/2015, no. 1, pp. 124–132, <https://doi.org/10.14712/24645370.2717>.

Hamilton. Bartha uses three examples from Hungarian history to prove how biographical research of rather “insignificant” historical actors can disturb our existing understanding of larger historical schemes and periods.

The next contribution, “Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk as a Subject of Scientific Apology after 1989,” sheds light on the influence of the author’s subjectivity on biography, as Professor Bohumil Jiroušek (University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice) analyses how easily a scholarly biography can turn into a hagiography. To do so, Jiroušek uses two main examples, namely two biographical works about Masaryk by Stanislav Polák and Jaroslav Opat. Furthermore, it touches on the question of the importance of biographical writing in the societal understanding of history as such.

The connection between biography and society, and respectively its readers, stands at the centre of attention of the study by doctor Václav Sixta (Charles University), titled “Biography and Memory: Karel Gott in Czech Culture of Remembrance.” It, on the one hand, revolves around a significant or rather well-known protagonist, the late Czech popstar Karel Gott, but, on the other hand, offers a unique understanding of his “second life.” It focuses on two auto/biographical books by/about Gott and analyses the readers’ reactions to them, thus showing which roles this type of writing may play in today’s world. Sixta consequently brings another theoretical inspiration for biography, which is its conceptualisation within the field of memory studies.

My article, “Only After Death Do Us Part? Contemporary Biography, Oral History, and Writing about Living People Today,” approaches the topic of subjectivity from a different angle, that is from the perspective of an intersubjective relationship between the biographer and their subject, as it reflects on an ongoing debate about whether and how biographical research can focus on living subjects, centring on the potential crossovers of biography and oral history. The text presents existing knowledge about their parallel use and responds to a polemic about *contemporary biography*, most strikingly posed by none other than the author of the next essay, Hans Renders. It addresses the problems of negotiating the role of an author and narrator and offers a different conceptualisation of “authorisation” within such research.

The last contribution, which focuses on the “last taboo in biography,” underlines our ambitions to establish global collaboration in the field of biography studies – as its author, Professor Hans Renders (University of

Groningen), is one of the world's most renowned and cited biographers, who has initiated leading theoretical discussions about biographical research and critical interpretive biography as a methodology. His article, "A Sick Body, A Sick Mind: The Last Taboo in Biography," is a provocative and thought-provoking text not only about what biographies may and should include, but also about which disciplines historians and biographers may derive their methodology from.

The biographical circle closes with the first review, in which doctor Jiří Němec (Masaryk University) reflects on reading the book *Milan Rastislav Štefánik. Muž, který sa rozprávval s hviezdami* [Milan Rastislav Štefánik. The Man Who Talked to the Stars] by doctor Michal Kšíňan (Slovak Academy of Sciences), who also participated in the aforementioned workshop. This review – and the monograph – follows and widens the perspective of previous contributions regarding not only its close relation especially to Jiroušek's study about biographies of Masaryk, but also its innovative and multi-methodological approach (Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *social and cultural capital*, Max Weber's concept of *charismatic authority*, theory of *collective memory*, and *lieux de mémoire*, i.e., sites of memory).

Different in terms of topics, yet equally as inspiring from the theoretical and methodological point of view, are the following three reviewed monographs: in the first, Eva Hajdinová (Charles University) emphasises the importance of capturing the perspective of the lay believers in the period of recatholisation in the book *Odpadlíci, noví křesťané a obyvatelé zpapeženěli: Náboženská proměna v pobělohorském období očima současníků* [Apostates, New Christians and Papists. Religious Transformation in the Post-White Mountain Era through the Eyes of Contemporaries] by Radmila Prchal Pavlíčková (Palacký University Olomouc).

The next review by Hana Knollová (Charles University) introduces to the Czech audience a new and original research path: the focus on trophy hunting, as presented in the eponymous book by Nikolaj Bichel (Oxford University) and Adam Hart (University of Gloucestershire). This, consequently, reopens the question of the relationship between humankind and nature.

A similar re-definition was an explicit aim of the last reviewed monograph, *Nepoddajné předměty. Ženská hnutí a feministický aktivismus ve sbírkách Národního muzea* [Unruly Objects. Women's Movements and Feminist Activism in the Collections of the National Museum] by Jitka Gelnarová (National Museum), who aims to re-interpret selected objects

from the perspective of the women's movement. Although Magdalena Grešová (Masaryk University) in her review critically evaluates a certain inconsistency and maybe even an author's approach deemed too subjective, she stresses the importance of this new "reading" of (especially) material sources, which can serve as a "thrown gauntlet" to other historians.

We may similarly approach all other contributions, which are mainly focused on selected challenges in biographical research, and which, I believe, offer new inspiration not only for biography but for historical studies too.

Finally, I would like to thank all authors, reviewers, and proofreaders who were involved in preparing this issue and the *History – Theory – Criticism* journal for providing a platform for discussing this topic. Enjoy your reading!

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