

The International Commission for the History of Towns

A short history (1955–2011)

By

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The period after 1945 was shaped by reconstruction in many different aspects. Especially in the early years, approximately the decade until the mid 50's, great dynamism and optimism together with the readiness for scientific co-operation and exchange prepared the ground also for a new phase of urban historical research. The quest for a general peace framework, the endeavour towards new forms of scientific, economic and political co-operation across national borders was predestined for a real recommencement in many fields. It is the sphere of politics where we can find similar evolutions, e. g. the constitution of the United Nations in 1945 or the foundation of the "European Coal and Steel Community" in Paris, 1951. Even further back, to 1926, goes the start of the "International Committee of Historical Sciences", being responsible for the organization of the International Congresses of Historians in a worldwide context.

In a manner very typical and characteristic for the history of science it were individuals in the 1950's, single researchers, who prepared and took care for an international institutionalisation of urban historical research: It was at the 10th International Congress of Historians, which took place from September 4–11, 1955 in the premises of the failed World Exhibition of 1942 in Rome (EUR/Esposizione Universale di Roma), where ground-breaking waves of innovations started. Historism was called into question, social sciences in general became growing impact – on the whole as well as conceptually as institutionally new ways were being opened. In this so very fruitful climate of a real atmosphere of departure – which in fact did lose its drive parallel to the political frictions of the West-East-antagonism from the middle of the 50's onwards – the situation for new ideas, new concepts and new projects was favourable. György Székely, Hungarian representative within the International Commission for the History of Towns being founded in Rome 1955, has stated in his contribution on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of this Commission in Kiel in 2005 that it was a presentation by Edith Ennen at the International Congress five

decades ago which gave the impulse that the International Committee of Historical Sciences gave the consent to the foundation of ICHT. The time for such an initiative was ripe and so the new umbrella organisation made possible an international platform and forum for discussions for the topics of urban historical research. One year later at the first General Assembly of ICHT in Dijon the young Commission did agree on a very general declaration of intent which paid respect to the manifold but also limited possibilities for the future: „La Commission internationale pour l'Histoire des villes a pour objet d'établir des contacts et de faciliter la coordination des recherches entre les spécialistes de toutes les branches de l'histoire des villes.“

The political evolution of the continent since the 1950's with events like the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the construction of the "Berlin Wall" in 1961 and the dramatic end of the "Prague Spring" in 1968 – and it was Europe on which the ambitions of the Commission were being concentrated for a long time – was nothing less than beneficial for the high aims of the scientific group. And it was symptomatic for the situation that amongst the members of ICHT it was only one representative of the countries behind the Iron Curtain, Aleksander Gieysztor from Poland, who was able to take part in the International Congress of Historians in Vienna, 1965.

The significance of ICHT has undertaken big changes in the 56 years since its foundation. Nevertheless it is the patronage over so many clearly defined projects being realised in the national context which forms its distinctive profile until the present days. A real pilot-project in 1955, a platform for the international transfer and communication of science hitherto unknown gave urban historical research an effective focus from the start. Next to the name of Edith Ennen being quoted already here an impressive number of foundation mothers and fathers and especially the presidents of ICHT should be named: In the early days of its existence colleagues like Hektor Ammann from Switzerland, Hermann Aubin, Erich Keyser and Heinz Stoob from Germany, Philippe Dollinger and Philippe Wolff from France and Andorra, Carlo Guido Mor and Gina Fasoli from Italy and Mary D. Lobel from the United Kingdom contributed to the progress of the Commission's activities in a very decisive manner. Two of these personalities, Hektor Ammann and Philippe Wolff acted also as presidents of ICHT, the great Slovenian historian of law Sergij Vilfan and the unforgotten Belgian historian Adriaan Verhulst, are the other two presidents already deceased. On the whole from 1955 to the present days not more than six presidents were guiding the Commission.

Another impressive testimonial for the successful efforts regarding a comprehensive coverage of the whole of Europe is the provenance of ICHT's members as well as the choice of the meeting-places for its General Assemblies since 1955/56. Apart from the regular presence at the International Congresses since 1955 the Commission met

five times in Germany and Italy, four times in Austria, three times in Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland, twice in Denmark, Greece, Great Britain, Luxembourg and Poland and once in Andorra, Bulgaria, Finland, Ireland, ex-Yugoslavia, Croatia, Spain, Sweden, the Soviet Union and Hungary. For the next three years the Assemblies will take place in Sibiu in Romania, in Prague and in Lisbon, so that "new" countries are going to host the ICHT.

Across the decades it were three big projects which form the centre of the Commission's scientific activities: the publication of national bibliographies on urban history, the edition of early relevant sources for urban history under the title "Elenchus fontium historiae urbanae" and the project of national Towns Atlases. On the whole the ambition is to shape a new basis for comparative urban history research on a Europe-wide context. Work for these projects was being initiated by different institutions and individual historians of the member-countries of the Commission. It is Mary Doreen Lobel from the UK with her first published Towns Atlas who shall be named here as one of the great initiators. The Atlas called "Historic Towns. Maps and Plans of Towns and Cities in the British Isles, with Historical Commentaries, from Earliest Times to 1800" was published with eight different towns in 1969.

Another important topic of the Commission's activities is the treatment of special themes in connection with the single International Congresses of Historians, its results being presented during the meetings of the ICHT during these occasions. Examples for these themes can be given for Moscow 1970 ("Urban Autonomy"), for San Francisco 1975 ("Social Structures and Urban Morphology"), for Bucarest 1980 ("City and Authority"), for Stuttgart 1985 ("Town and Countryside"), for Madrid 1990 ("New Towns"), for Montreal 1995 ("Exhibitions and Fairs"), for Oslo 2000 ("Destruction and Reconstruction of Towns"), for Sydney 2005 ("The Image of the Town") and for Amsterdam 2010 ("Town and Communication"). For the International Congress of 2015 the commission has chosen the theme "The City and its Spaces".

It is necessary to underline that nowadays the International Commission is not the only international organisation for urban historical research or even a *global player* in this field. The scientific interest in urban development has risen enormously during the last decades and so some of organisations with similar interests should be named here: In 1985 the "Centre for Urban History" at the University of Leicester started its activities concentrated on research as well as on teaching. In 1988 in Cincinnati (USA) a special association under the name "The Urban History Association" was being formed and one year later the "European Association for Urban History" was founded. The latter has organised a big Congress every two years since the early 1990's (2004 Athens, 2006 Stockholm, 2008 Lyon, 2010 Gent, 2012 Prague), its

presidency changes with the places of these Congresses. In 1994 the "International Seminar on Urban Form (ISUF)" started as a new platform for research with regard to urban morphology and it is the enormously multidiscipline approach (the participation of representatives of Architecture, Geography, History and Sociology) which characterises this research group. The International Medieval Congresses in Leeds which began also in 1994 have dedicated their Congress in July 2007 to the topic "The medieval City".

Going back once again to the three big projects of the ICHT it is the Atlas-Project which is really widespread and bears the greatest importance. And it was especially the initiative of my dear friend Anngret Simms, who in 1993 in Trier brought the "Atlas Working Group" of the Commission into being which helped decisively to underline the significance of the Atlas-Project(s). From the start Anngret has invited me to take part in this initiative, and I am very grateful to her not only for the confidence but also for the countless animations given to me.

With respect to the big amount of personal involvement and enthusiasm for the Towns Atlas-work I would like to give some more detailed information here: Its familiar denomination as "European Towns Atlas" has described a rather idealistic ambition and intent in the beginning at the end of the 1960's, at present it has become a sort of reality in many aspects. In a certain way the idea to make Towns objects of cartographic or artistic exposures goes back long in history, but for long times it was the time-dependent look, the image of the beautiful or – quite generally – the interesting town or the availability of an exact and actual Town-plan which was at the centre of the efforts. It was not without very distinctive interferences with the progress of historical sciences on the whole that the reflection of historical analyses on the basis of maps became more and more usual. Especially within the context of the history of individual towns maps became part of the common canon and the normal repertoire.

The first regional Town-Atlas-projects started in Germany in the first half of the 20th century, and it is the "Niedersächsische Städteatlas", being founded by Paul Jonas Meier (1857–1946), later the Director of the Herzog-Anton-Ulrich-Museum in Braunschweig which was the first one to be published. Nevertheless it was not before the ICHT came into being in the mid 1950's that the idea of a Town Atlas being structured on the basis of identical and comparable guidelines emerged. Five years ago, in 2006, Wilfried Ehbrecht of the Institute for comparative Urban History in Münster/Westfalia has pointed out the big role being played by the Swiss urban historian Hektor Ammann, president of the ICHT until 1967. It was Ammann who took part in the definition of the methodological framework for the Atlas-project. His curriculum vitae – rather similar to that of quite a number of his colleagues – makes

clear that his conviction with regard to the must of a supra-regional, international comparison is definitely influenced by his assent towards the ideas of a supra-national "Volks- und Kulturgemeinschaft", and after 1945 he did belong to the politically burdened circles of persons of the former NS-period. Nevertheless Ammanns ambition to participate in a most active way in the construction of new foundations for scientific research maintains its importance. He was planning a number of approximately 400 Town Atlases for the whole of Europe and in the meantime this goal has been outnumbered widely – at the moment 18 European countries are taking or have taken part in this project and 488 Town-Atlases have been published.

As mentioned before it was essential that guidelines which were accepted as standards by the different national Atlas-projects could be and were formulated. From the early 1960's very intensive discussions among the members of the Commission started, for Germany similar reflections go back even further, to the first half of the 1950's. In 1968 at the General Assembly in Oxford guidelines for the scientific work on Towns Atlases were adopted. The program for any Town being included into the series of Towns Atlases consisted of: (1) a new engraving of the first cadastre map on the scale of 1:2.500 as the oldest detailed map for the respective town (such maps are available for all countries), (2) the reproduction of a coeval map regarding the surroundings of the Town on the scale of 1:25.000, (3) some accompanying maps and (4) a historic commentary on the Town's history and evolution. One year later, in 1969, the British Atlas mentioned already earlier was the first one to be published in the impressive number of following Town-Atlases. The history of the whole project from 1969 onwards can really be described as a "history of success", although a number of ups and downs followed all these years.

At the moment – as already quoted before – the European Towns Atlas project is present in 18 countries of Europe, such publications are already available for 488 Towns. Important promoters for the evolution of the single national projects were the foundations of respective institutions in the field of Urban Historical Research, e. g. the Institute for comparative Urban History in Münster/Westfalia and the Austrian Association for Urban Historical Research in Linz, both being initiated in 1969. For Austria it was the integration of a special Ludwig-Boltzmann-Institute for Urban Historical Research in the framework of the Association into the Vienna City Archives from 1977/78 onwards which made possible the editing of even two Atlases, the Austrian Atlas of Historic Towns ("Österreichischer Städteatlas") and the Historical Atlas for Vienna ("Historischer Atlas von Wien"). Another fruitful way was the co-operation of Towns-Atlas-projects with universities and/or Academies of Science, and in this regard I would like to name the successful example of the Irish Historic Towns Atlas being edited by the Royal Irish Academy with my deepest respect.

Although the institutional framework is decisive for the progress of the Atlas-projects it is the dynamic, the verve, the readiness for action and the enthusiasm of the single scientist which keeps the things going.

To provide also an overview over the progresses from the end of the 1960's up to now I would like to present the beginnings of the national Atlas-projects in chronological order: After the UK the projects for Germany and Finland did start in the 1970's, the 80's saw new projects for France, the Netherlands and Austria (all in 1982), for Denmark and Sweden (both in 1983), for Italy and Ireland (both in 1986) and for Iceland with the only published Atlas for Reykjavik in 1988 – meaning that the number of national projects has risen from 4 to 12. Up to 1989 not a single East-European country had taken part in the Atlas-project, but this changed immediately with the fall of Communism and of the Iron Curtain. In the 1990's after Belgium (1990) Town Atlases were being initiated for Poland (1993), the Czech Republic (1995) and for Switzerland (1997). It was exactly in the year 2000 when Romania joined the group of Atlas-publishers, three years later (2003) Croatia followed with an Atlas close to our guidelines. In Germany there was not only the "Deutsche Städteatlas" but also two territorial Atlases, the "Rheinischer Städteatlas" and the "Westfälischer Städteatlas", and now, in 2005, a Town-Atlas for Hesse began to be published. Since last year Hungary has joined the international Atlas-team being directed by the member of our Commission's board, Katalin Szende, together with a small, young, but very effectively working team at the Central European University in Budapest.

The most recent developments can be seen in the efforts to publish the Atlases which are so difficult to handle in their printed versions in an electronic form. After the publication of the Town Atlas of Bologna in 1999, it was the Irish and the Austrian Towns Atlases which published the first CD's and DVD's of a number of Towns (for Ireland 16, for Austria 59 Towns). As a matter of fact this method opens up new possibilities of using the Atlases, providing not only for the searchability of the texts but also the maps about the growing phases of the single towns and enabling the magnification of the illustrations in order to have a closer look to interesting details.

In an era of drastic economic crises, a period of – seen from a global perspective – hitherto unknown and for the modern times almost unbelievable catastrophies, political ones, like the incidents of 9/11 of 2001, and especially natural ones, like the tsunami of 2004, the volcanic eruptions in Iceland in 2009 and the earthquakes, the tsunami and the nuclear danger in Japan in our days, it is not easy to pay attention to the basic importance of Urban Historical Research and to ask for a secure and sufficient funding of the respective projects and/or institutions. In fact in many

countries being represented in our ICHT we are confronted with serious problems for the future funding of our work. Sometimes even institutes are being closed, and in this respect it has to be said that the methods of evaluation are also approaching the limits of sense.

Nevertheless, science and scientists stand out by their insistence and tenacity, by their abilities to get over such times full of problems. It is not so easy to discourage them they don't throw so easily in the towel. Individual engagement and personal enthusiasm for the topic have to be counted on the positive side – and for this all the national members of our ICHT are the best guarantee.