
Chancing Your Arm: The Origins and Early Years of *Contemporary European History*

KATHLEEN BURK

It is an exciting thing to launch a new journal, and in this case it reflects the fact that we in Europe are living in interesting times. We are clearly on the brink of a new Europe: 1992 will see the United Kingdom and Ireland more fully integrated into the European Community, and *glasnost* has set in train unknown but certainly far-reaching changes in the USSR and Eastern and East Central Europe. Beyond this, year by year the concept of Europe as both a geographical and an historical entity becomes more credible, and there is increasing interest, not only in the histories of individual countries, but in how their histories compare with each other.¹

In 1989 I was chatting to Anthony Seldon, then the head of the Institute of Contemporary British History in London, and we agreed that the turmoil and resultant developments in the Eastern bloc gave hope for the rise of a new Europe. We were academics, and we immediately considered how information and ideas about these exciting events might be provided to the academic community. What about a journal? We looked around. There were many journals focusing on what was then termed Western Europe, and some on the bloc then termed Eastern Europe, as well as on the USSR; there was a journal on contemporary history *in toto*, although it was then in something of a quiescent period. Our conclusion was that there was no general academic journal which stood back and focused on the whole of Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, as the area was then described. We decided that something should be done about it.

Anthony put me in touch with Dick Geary, a historian of Germany, and then withdrew from the discussions. Dick and I met, talked things over and decided to go ahead. I then sat down with fountain pen and paper, considered what we wanted to do and wrote a proposal. I sent it off to Frank Cass and to Cambridge University Press. Frank Cass himself was in my office two days later and offered to publish it. However, with Frank Cass, it was not an option to have the footnotes at the bottom of the page, which we considered to be desirable bordering on necessary. Fortunately, Cambridge also contacted us. We had lunch with the head of the Journals Division and some of her colleagues, and they were enthusiastic – they had, they said, been

¹ Kathleen Burk and Dick Geary, 'Editorial', *Contemporary European History*, 1, 1 (1992), i.

looking for such a journal. The decision was that, subject to favourable responses to the proposal which they had already sent out to five readers in Britain and the United States, they would publish the journal.

Dick and I had already taken certain decisions, a number of them centred on the priority of attracting writers and readers from beyond the Anglophone community. First of all, we would have abstracts in English, French and German so that colleagues who could read any of those languages could decide whether an article was worth their while to translate it. Secondly, we would have two review editors, one German-speaking and the other fluent in one of the Latin languages, in order to have the greatest possible scope in discussing new books. Thirdly, we were aware that in some countries, believe it or not, there can be political/academic feuds, sometimes centred on certain journals. In order to evade this problem, we determined that neither of the two referees of a manuscript would come from the country of the writer. And fourthly, we decided that we needed to be able to publish the best articles in whatever language they were written. To enable this, we regularly put our editors' fees, such as they were, into a building society account, and announced that any article that deserved publication would be translated into English, even if we had to pay for it. (I rapidly became familiar with the fees charged by translators: those for French and German were relatively low, whilst that for Dutch was relatively high). This worked very well, producing articles from a wide range of countries.

Related to this was our desire to encourage colleagues from east and east central Europe to join the international academic community, from which many had been excluded for obvious reasons. This was not being patronising: we were convinced that we in the rest of the academic world had as much to learn from them as they had from us. Furthermore, those colleagues further east often had access to material that others did not. In this context, one of the articles with which I was most pleased was 'Hungary's Part in the Soviet-Yugoslav Conflict, 1956–58', written by a Hungarian historian.²

And finally, we saw the journal as 'specialist' in its time period but 'generalist' in the types of history that we wanted to publish. The intention was not to concentrate on political or social or economic or international or cultural or gender or on any other historical genre: rather, if a manuscript fell into the time period, and it was of the necessary quality, we would publish it. As a footnote here, I found the range of what constituted 'contemporary history' impressively wide. For the French contemporary history begins in 1789; for the British, the starting date is 1945. However, we rather believed that as the years went on, the continuity between pre-1945 and post-1945 would assume more importance than the use of 1945 as a crevasse between the two. The end of the First World War seemed to be a clearer breaking point, and this became the starting date for material in the journal.

² 'Hungary's Part in the Soviet-Yugoslav Conflict, 1956–58', *Contemporary European History*, 7, 1 (1998), 197–225.

One of our first tasks once we had a contract was to put together two boards, an advisory board and an editorial board. (We had, of course, waved some possible names in front of Cambridge). An advisory board was to be on the small side and composed of Great Historians: this, as one of our choices told me, was to reassure the publisher, as no one else looked at it. Our first advisory board was composed of two historians from Germany, three from the United Kingdom and one each from France, the United States and Poland. One of our UK choices agreed that we could use his name, but that we were not to expect him to do any work. Fortunately, not all of them felt this way, and our German and French board members were particularly helpful. Their last appearance on our masthead was the final issue of 1996: an advisory board was no longer needed, given that the journal was now firmly established.

From the outset we knew that the editorial board was of supreme importance. We did not want mushrooms who had reputations but were no longer producing much new work; rather, we looked to colleagues in their forties and fifties who were energetic and productive, and who were willing actually to participate in building a new journal. Not all of our choices lived up to these high expectations, but enough of them did to make the journal's debut of academic note. (Several historians from one particular country were quoted to me as wondering how such a European-wide journal could emerge from the United Kingdom, known as it was for its detachment from the Continent). In the end, we had ten board members from the United Kingdom, three each from the United States and Germany, and one each from Switzerland, Finland, Italy, Denmark and Czechoslovakia. We wanted the board to feel a comradeship, and Dick and I decided that this required a yearly meeting. Fortunately, CUP agreed, and all members who required some financial help received it. (I spent some time before each meeting trying to divide the funds up fairly.)

An important decision was what the journal should do about reviews. It did not seem to us that the historical profession was crying out for more individual book reviews, yet excellent review articles can be immensely useful and stimulating, and they were what we decided to publish. They could, however, be difficult to organise: the need was not infrequent for a historian who was knowledgeable about a topic *and* able to read books in more than one language. Hence the need for review editors who had a command of at least two and a long contact list. Our first two were a German speaker and a French speaker; with the departure of the French-speaker to become editor of another journal, he was replaced by an Italian speaker. This dance continued.

Analogous to this was our decision that the final issue each year would be a theme issue organised by a member of the editorial board; this would give scope to introduce unusual topics and to bring in historians from various countries (this latter goal was aided by our translation policy). Although some of the articles might have to be commissioned, nevertheless they would all go through the review process (over the years, sadly, not all of them emerged successfully). The problem here, of course, was that the board during its meetings could call all they wanted for publication of

work on various riveting and important topics, but if no one was doing the work, there was nothing we could do. Nevertheless, in several cases path-breaking work was commissioned by theme issue editors determined to open up a new field: one example was 'The European Family and Politics'.³

And so we got to work. As in all cases of this type, we turned to friends for the first issue, and they responded. It was a star-studded cast, and this was vital to get the journal noticed and interest raised: people, and especially institutions, had to invest in subscriptions. CUP told me that the break-even point was four hundred subscriptions, and as many as possible should be institutional, for the simple reason that institutions are more likely than individuals to keep a subscription going – and they are also charged more. The subsequent issues maintained the quality of the first. When after one year over a hundred institutions, many in the United States, had taken out subscriptions, CUP were impressed, and decided that the journal was going to succeed. Clearly it has.

Several years into the life of the journal we had a crisis, and this led to another important innovation. For much of 1994 Dick Geary was very ill, and full responsibility for the journal fell to me. I should add that there was neither an associate editor nor an editorial administrator, as there were subsequently, and I found myself doing everything from organising referees to chasing them up, dealing with recalcitrant writers, reading the proofs and packing everything up – twice – and sending it to the publisher. This, of course, was in addition to a full teaching load, lots of publishing deadlines of my own and a family. CUP eventually noticed that I had my hands full and suggested that I appoint an associate editor.

I decided that I had two goals in choosing a colleague. First of all was the need for help pure and simple. But beyond that, I wanted to establish a new custom, which was to appoint someone on the basis that he or she would in due course succeed to the editorship. I had embarked on this voyage without a full knowledge of what was required, and had very much learned on the job. I was determined that the journal would, if possible, grow its own editors, so that the associate would begin by handling a full issue and would be very experienced by the time of succession. My colleague at University College London, Jonathan Morris, was the first associate editor, appearing as such on the masthead of the March 1995 issue; he was joined fairly soon thereafter by Johannes Paulmann, at that point attached to the German Historical Institute in London. In 1997 Mary Vincent succeeded Johannes Paulmann, who had returned to Germany, as associate editor. Dick Geary remained as co-editor until 1999, when he resigned; at this point, Jon Morris became co-editor. When I myself resigned, Mary Vincent moved up, joining Jon as co-editor. The scheme had worked.

Not everything that we wanted to do worked out. One failure was the Noticeboard. We had planned to include in each issue news about research institutes, research ventures and conferences; we all know about such things in our own fields, but it can be difficult to learn about those in contiguous fields, except by accident or personal contacts. This began well, but by volume 6 (1997) the section had

³ 'The European Family and Politics', *Contemporary European History*, 4, 3 (1995).

disappeared; announcements of conferences might come in, but as often as not, they arrived too late to appear in the journal. Too much work was being expended for insignificant results.

One innovation which did succeed, and which continues to this day, was the organisation of a small conference or workshop, connected to the year's annual editorial board meeting, and concentrated on local postgraduates. Because it is the custom of the board to meet outside of Britain every other year, it helps members to learn what is happening in other areas, and it gives the postgraduates both experience and exposure. The first such occasion took place in Oslo and a subsequent one in New York City; more recent ones were held in Madrid and Budapest.

By 2000 it was clear to me that it was time to leave the editorship. I believed strongly that a major reason for the doldrums in which a once-important journal was floating in the late 1980s was the fact that both editors had held their positions for twenty-five years. No matter how excellent he or she may be in a position, no one is indispensable. The March 2001 issue saw my final appearance on the masthead as editor.⁴ The leaving of a senior person can send a bolt of new energy through an organisation: new ideas, new projects, new approaches bubble up. The post of editorial assistant was established, thereby relieving the editors of some of the drudgery associated with producing a journal. In 2002 the volume of excellent submissions led the journal to move from three to four issues a year. Since then, the quality of the articles has remained very high, the range continues to expand and the reputation of the journal continues to grow: it is now seen as possibly the major journal in its particular field. The primary reason is the quality and hard work of the editors and the editorial board. For me personally, it is all very gratifying.

⁴ *Contemporary European History*, 10, 1 (2001).