

Foreward

Dear Readers,

As a graduate student in the fall of 2009, I was lucky enough to audit a European History survey course at the University of California, Berkeley. The professor was one of the greats of German history—in my mind, as close to a legend as an academic could be. It was her final time teaching it before she retired. In her bi-weekly lectures, the professor told her three or four hundred assembled undergraduate students the story of Europe from the fall of Constantinople to the fall of the Berlin Wall, demonstrating the kind of magisterial command of history and historical narrative that can only be earned by spending decades reading, researching, writing, and teaching. Yet the professor was fully aware that not every student in that cavernous lecture hall was there out of genuine passion for the Holy Roman Empire or the Weimar Republic. Many were fulfilling a graduation requirement, checking a box on their way to Computer Science degrees and careers in Silicon Valley. So, on the first day of class, she stood at a podium onstage and asked, “why are we here? Why is it important to study history?”

She first rejected the tired cliché that “those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it” (history doesn’t repeat, she said, at least not exactly, and besides, plenty of people who did study history have screwed up pretty badly regardless) and then the dismissive idea that historical knowledge is primarily useful for making a person more interesting at dinner parties (though, she added, it certainly will do that). Instead, the professor said, we know history is important because people who have wanted to wield power and control others have long believed that history was important. When Napoleon became Emperor of France, he made sure that the history taught in schools was a historical narrative that made his rise to power as legitimate as it was inevitable. Hitler mandated that the history taught in German schools supported his nationalist and anti-semitic political aims. If people like that knew that history was important, she told the students, then we probably want to recognize it too.

Fifteen years later, I am not sure the college

students of today—even the tech industry-bound among them—would require as much convincing about the importance of history. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was premised on a spurious historical claim to Ukrainian land and culture. Disagreements about how the history of the United States should be told have reached the presidential debate stage and the Supreme Court. The protests that erupted on campuses last spring in response to the war in Gaza were, at least in part, about history: about historical claims to land and about how injustices in the past should weigh on and inform the present. Every presidential election in the average undergraduate’s memory has been framed by the media and by the candidates themselves as one of historic, possibly even existential, importance. (I am old enough to remember presidential elections that were more or less centered on policy disagreements.) State legislatures across the country have proposed monitoring or even censoring syllabi in disciplines like history—a statement about the power of history and how we tell it if there ever was one. Far from a novelty that might only be useful at dinner parties, today the weight of history seems impossible to avoid.

Because history has come to loom so large in recent years, the vitality of the Chicago Journal of History—an entirely undergraduate student-run and -led publication—and the fact that it has attracted such a passionate group of editors to lead it may not be entirely surprising. But that makes it no less heartening. The issue that follows this note is the third post-pandemic edition. The last two issues published papers on everything from the role of European ideas of scientific racism shaped Confederate politics and policy to the fetishization of French laundresses in the early nineteenth century and the impact of reports of German atrocities in World War I-era Britain, by undergraduate authors from the University of Arkansas to Columbia University to the London School of Economics. All of them were selected out of dozens of submissions and meticulously edited, formatted, and compiled by CJH’s editors into editions that brilliantly showcase the intellect, historical research skills, and passion of undergraduate History students

today. It is only fitting, then, that this Fall 2024 issue of the Journal is dedicated to two of the CJH's longtime and most dedicated editors: Henry Hong (UChicago, A.B. '25) and Sammy Zimmerman (UChicago, A.B. '24)

Hong's paper, "Double Decker Dualism: Discourse on Display," is an analysis of the Chinese American Museum of Chicago's physical exhibition space. Due to the constraints of the building that houses the museum, temporary exhibits on Chinese culture and history are placed on a separate floor from the permanent exhibit on the Chinese American experience. Hong's observation that the physical separation between the exhibits helps to create a narrative in the minds of visitors, in which the experience of diaspora is both intertwined with and separate from the place of origin. This insight is not just a useful metaphor for understanding Chinese American history; it also is deeply revealing about the power of place to shape how public history is told and received. Zimmerman's paper, "Haunted Empire: Gothic Japanism in British Literature of the Fin de Siècle," is an exploration of how the literary genre of "Gothic Japanism" came into vogue in Britain at precisely the moment that the British public was becoming aware of Japan as a geopolitical equal—even, possibly a rival. Zimmerman's argument—that the emergence of this genre was an attempt on the part of British readers to interpret Japan—is as elegant and subtle as it is revealing about the power of cultural objects to shape both public opinion and political action.

As the reader will undoubtedly come to see, both of these papers attest to the extraordinarily talented historians that have helped to lead the revival of the CJH over the past year. It is wonderful to have the opportunity to honor their work in these pages.

Warmly,

Peggy Heffington