

*Philipp Müller*

## Past Intensities. An Obituary for Alf Lüdtke (1943–2019)

### ABSTRACT

This obituary commemorates the life and work of the nationally and internationally renowned German historian Alf Lüdtke, who is best known for his concept of the everyday history and who, in the 1970s and 1980s, together with other colleagues, began to develop historically questions inspired by concepts of anthropology. With his studies he made very important contributions to the history of policing, violence, fascism in Germany and governance in general. In this context he began very early to highlight the importance of symbols and emotions and the role of ordinary women and men in historical processes and dynamics of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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Intensity was a trademark of Alf Lüdtke's in his private life as well as in his historical research. His concept of the history of the everyday, his historical working methods, his writing and his criticism—whether solicited or unsolicited—were always characterised by the endeavour to think the intensity of history and also to produce it purposefully.

This endeavour was guided by his firm conviction that diversity, differences, and the combination of heterogenous elements proved rather productive means to generate the intensity he desired. For this reason, he repeatedly considered collage-like forms of textual representation and was interested in the possibilities afforded by the montage of text and image to arrive at novel views. His efforts are most evident, however, in his answer to the question of who should be involved in an undertaking such as historical research. The Colloquium for Police History, for example, which he co-initiated and ran for years together with Herbert Reinke, was not just a forum for scholarly studies. It was deliberately open to police officers interested in history and/or in doing independent research on the subject of police history, and together—also with the steady support and enthusiasm of Michael Sturm—they worked with associations, museums and educational institutions.

For Alf Lüdtke, history was a matter of the many, both in the past and in the present. In retrospect, it was therefore particularly important to focus on those women and men who had already been, seemingly unintentionally, ignored at the time and who were not predestined to be monumentalised in the politics of remembrance. But even in the present, history was an undertaking that would not and could not be an elitist. More people had to be involved in it than the few academics who researched historical topics professionally. In both respects, his thinking and his ‘doing’ of history was decisively influenced by political ideas and performances in the 1960s and 1970s, a time in which the opening up and democratisation of society and politics was a generally respected and pursued political project. He himself contributed significantly to this by seeking contact and exchange with the history workshops and participating in their movement, which also resulted in the founding of the journal *WerkstattGeschichte*.<sup>1</sup> For related reasons, he invited to his own research colloquium not only students and doctoral candidates who exchanged views on their dissertations. Film-makers, journalists, and archivists and other professions engaged in the production of history were also guests at his colloquium at the Max Planck Institute for History in Göttingen and later at the Centre for Historical Anthropology at the University of Erfurt, which he had co-founded with his colleague and friend Hans Medick. The different professional and social activities of the people he assembled promised untapped knowledge and new perspectives on the otherwise so familiar terrain of history. It was especially through this aspect—the encounter and engagement with different professional and social practices and their specific knowledge beyond the boundaries of professional historiography—that he saw the opportunity to establish unexpected relationships and to gain new insights.

For him, the encounter with the intellectually unexpected was also the attraction of the interdisciplinary Graduiertenkolleg “Mediale Historiographien. Media of History—History of Media”, which he had helped design and in which he participated from the beginning. It was precisely these intellectual encounters, as he once remarked, that did not come about by themselves in the day-to-day routine of academia. It was, therefore, not only necessary to keep the threshold for irritation as low as possible, but also to do something about it from time to time. Above all, he knew how to introduce an elegant procedure to promote the possibilities of such encounters. The first part of the exercise was to get rid of the standard form of academic exchange: the expert talk. The second part of the exercise consisted of choosing a specific material item when introducing a research project. The chosen item—in practice this could turn out to be a picture postcard, a film, a container gridlock or even a work of art—would trigger other viewpoints. It was the concrete and multifaceted materiality that turned into a

1 Its website is available at <https://werkstattgeschichte.de/> (last accessed 26 January, 2021).

productive force for everyone involved in the discussion, and, in this manner, an unintended and uncalculated polyphony was to be created.

Against this backdrop, his public commitment to history is hardly surprising. Of the many initiatives that he launched and the many projects in which he was involved, the example “Topf und Söhne” is particularly worth mentioning.<sup>2</sup> The Erfurt-based company “Topf und Söhne” was in the business of firing technology during the German Empire and began to specialise in cremation, among other things, before the firm eventually developed and produced the cremation ovens for the crematoria at the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. In cooperation with students from the University of Erfurt, Alf Lüdtke developed micro-historically designed guided tours for a new exhibition in the east German town, and, in cooperation with his students, made factory photographs from the former company archive accessible. Above all, however, he was involved in the uncovering of this German site of remembrance and supported it significantly. Another project was dedicated to researching the Erfurt uprising on 17 June 1953. Together with his students, including his later assistant professor Sebastian Jobs, he researched the uprising—an event that was previously known primarily as a phenomenon limited to Berlin. Together, they created a public exhibition in the centre of the town, the Anger, about the uprisings and riots. The posters attached to construction fences aroused the interest of the public to such an extent that, ultimately, more eyewitnesses were identified and the historical studies could eventually be deepened; a second and larger exhibition with the title “Ausnahmezustand” (state of emergency) in Erfurt’s Stadtmuseum followed suit. Above all, however, the posters enabled a direct and sometimes exceptionally open discussion with the citizens of the city, and to a few of them, the displayed original of the firing order that went from the district authority to the police, was—in retrospect—an unacceptable public annoyance.

The pursuit of the intensity of history was central to Alf Lüdtke’s understanding of particular facets of history. For him, the history of political violence, for example, was not exhausted in a legal decree and its numerous series and anonymous processes. Historical analysis had to trace the relations of power and violence—in their entire breadth—as they occurred and unfolded in people’s lives. This history, therefore, also included actors who appropriated new authorisations for themselves to inflict pain on others, and it also included those women and men who suffered this pain and had to endure it; *Eigensinn*—this most famous coinage of Alf Lüdtke’s and at the same time a frequently misunderstood concept—was present here on both sides. A further consequence of his understanding of history was that mundane things and aspects of history experienced a fundamental revaluation. As Walter Benjamin once demanded, it was necessary to distance oneself from the sacralised objects of history and, in turn,

2 The project information website is available at <http://www.topfundsoehne-fotos.de/topfundsoehne/projektinformationen.html> (last accessed 26 January 2021).

to focus on the everyday actors, their practices and their things. Unlike Walter Benjamin, however, Alf Lüdtke's reappraisal of the mundane did not undergo a literary-aesthetic transformation. Rather, he regularly warned against the danger of romanticising the everyday, which was precisely what the aesthetic appeal of the particular and the marginal lent itself to. Instead, the things of the past became objects of meticulous, microanalytical study.

The imperative of intensity was momentous for his own writing of history. Every single word had to be perfectly correct in terms of content. Thematically, all variants of a historical issue had to be taken into account and, moreover, integrated into the overall structure of a text. For Alf Lüdtke, this was an essential ethical as well as intellectual duty of a historian's work. What is more, single sentences of his texts sometimes do not just articulate a particular valid observation on one level, but rather a statement that must be correct on several levels simultaneously; and in the further sequence of sentences, the number of levels may then additionally vary. As a result, some of his texts, especially those studies originally written in German, undergo an unusually high degree of compression and finally take on an analytical, even philosophical quality. In this way, he abandoned a genuinely historical option of text composition—the lightness of historical narration based on the succession of words—and consequently irritated readers accustomed to the linear progression of sentences and topics. As much as Alf Lüdtke stretched his historical texts and studies to the limit—following his concept of history, he demanded a great deal of himself as well as of his social and intellectual environment, in order to convey the multidimensionality of the everyday. Well, historical intensity is not a given, as he would have put it.

Alf Lüdtke died on 29 January 2019. With him, we have without a doubt lost a great and inspiring source of historical intensity.

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