

# **Making invisible histories visible. Deaf and hard of hearing people in German-speaking Europe from the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the present**

## **Introduction**

Anja Werner, Marion Schmidt

Deaf people have always been present in history. Yet the establishment of Deaf History as an academic field of study has been a recent development. In Germany, historians only became interested in Deaf History in the 1990s. This interest started even later in Austria and Switzerland, that is, around the turn to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Often, it was deaf people themselves who started to investigate the history of their associations as well as the biographies of prominent deaf people.

In Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, Deaf History is still a marginal field in academic history. There are no professorships, departments, or academic journals dedicated to this particular subject. Two main reasons may be found as an explanation: first, Discrimination in (higher) education that continues to exclude deaf people from enrolling in history programs and becoming historians themselves. Second, scholars who are engaged in Deaf History work in numerous different locations and fields including history, (special) education, linguistics, and media studies. As a result, there are hardly any opportunities for exchange and networking.

From 2020 to 2024, we tried to address these issues in a research network funded by the German Research Association (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, DFG). Here, we organized scholars from different fields of study as well as members from various deaf organizations. Our goals were to bring together these diverse groups and to disseminate Deaf History research to a broader academic as well as general public. All meetings were held with

interpreting for German and Austrian Sign languages in addition to live transcription for spoken German. While interpreting and live transcripts should be an established standard, they actually remain an exception in Germany today, an oversight that contributes to the exclusion of deaf and hard-of-hearing people from academia. Lack of access and communication thus prevent exchanges between deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing researchers.

Our research focused on four topics: 1) The changing political contexts in central Europe in which deaf people have lived from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. For example, in Germany and Austria, the history of the “Third Reich” and its aftermath continues to play an important role. Then again, for Germany, the different histories of the two German states significantly influenced deaf people’s opportunities of professional, societal, and political participation.

2) Language acquisition and education. The first schools for deaf people in central Europe were founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ever since then, Germany and Switzerland have shared a strong oralist tradition, that is, the belief that speech is superior to sign language in teaching deaf children. The debate over the right method of deaf education has dominated deaf education into the present and, consequently, has also influenced research topics in Deaf History. This debate is closely tied to changing perceptions of language, citizenship, and the question of what makes humans human.

3) The history of hard-of-hearing people as a new field of study. The distinction between deaf and hard-of-hearing people is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was made possible by more precise instruments to measure hearing loss and an increasing stratification of students into different groups of “ability” in deaf and general education. Usually, hard-of-hearing people were encouraged to

blend in with hearing society, thus making invisible their specific history and challenges, which to some degree—but not entirely—overlaps with the history of deaf people.

4) The ways in which deaf and hard-of-hearing people have been represented and have represented themselves in society and diverse forms of media.

Contributions to our project show that Deaf History is an important part of historiographic traditions at large. Yet they also show research gaps and the need to provide more equal access to higher education and academic research.

Research results were published in two venues:

1) An edited volume in German that was published in the Campus Disability History series in 2024: [https://www.campus.de/buecher-campus-verlag/wissenschaft/geschichte/unsichtbare\\_geschichten\\_sichtbar\\_machen-18145.html](https://www.campus.de/buecher-campus-verlag/wissenschaft/geschichte/unsichtbare_geschichten_sichtbar_machen-18145.html).

2) Short, subtitled videos in German Sign Language (DGS) which, together with German transcripts and their English translations, can be found on the project website: <https://www.uni-erfurt.de/to/JnybkOCCeRXHFLNI>.