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Interview

The ICHS/CISH: Aim, Mission and Future.

Interview with Catherine Horel,
President of the International Committee of Historical Sciences/
Comité International des Sciences Historiques



Catherine Horel is Director of Research at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique, working in the CETOBAC laboratory. She specialises in the contemporary history of Central Europe. Her latest book, *Multicultural Cities of the Habsburg Empire 1880–1914. Imagined Communities and Conflictual Encounters*, CEU Press Budapest – Vienna – New York 2023, has been awarded the Prize for Urban Studies delivered by the Austrian foundation Pro Civitate Austriae.

Since 2021, Catherine Horel has been President of CISH/ICHS (Comité International des Sciences Historiques/International Committee of Historical Sciences; <https://www.cish.org/index.php/en/>), having previously held the position of General Secretary from 2015 to 2021.

The idea for this interview came from Alain Soubigou, based at the University of Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne.

The interview was conducted by Radmila Švaříčková Slabáková, a dedicated participant in the ICHS congresses since 2000 and Vice-President of the Czech National Committee of Historians. Newly in office, she was keen to learn more about the ways in which the world association of historians, founded in 1926, works. She was intrigued by the relevance of this traditional organisation in today's digital world and by the ways in which it stimulates the development of world historiography. Having known Catherine Horel for approximately twenty years, she was also interested in what the Presidency brings to the President personally. The interview took place in French, online on 22 April 2024 and in person in Ostrava on 4 September 2024.

Catherine, there may be historians who have never heard of ICHS. Why would they be interested in ICHS?

ICHS/CISH was founded in 1926 in the aftermath of the First World War with the central argument being “never again war, never again”. The idea was for historians to work together to understand how war came about and possibly try to avoid it. This was very illusory and very generous. The aim of the International Committee was to bring together historians from all over the world, represented by their national committees. Historians were to meet every five years at major congresses to make possible dialogue and meetings between them, coming from different countries and different traditions. After the Second World War, they started again in 1950, and something new was introduced: there were no longer just national committees, but thematic associations of historians. For example, there was a commission on the French Revolution, on the Second World War, the International Federation on Women's History, and so on.

Can we pretend that historians need ICHS?

You could argue that ICHS is useless nowadays. We do not need ICHS to meet each other, when we are working in the same region or on the same thing. But when are you going to meet an Algerian or a Japanese or a Chinese? There are interna-

tional associations, for example the International Commission for the History of Towns – there, you will meet a Chinese person working on cities. But at ICHS, you will meet a Chinese person working on a different subject. The World Congress is the only time you can meet that kind of person. That is the strength of ICHS: the fact that it is global, multidisciplinary and trans-period. In recent years, we have insisted on being global and trans-period.

ICHS is made up of both national committees and international thematic associations, often called commissions. Every five years, a World Congress is organised, which brings together both the national committees and the thematic associations.

In today's world, it is these thematic associations that are more important than national committees. Why is this so? Many historians work in countries other than their own, for example a German historian is a professor in the United States. The national committees are still a bit traditional, whereas the international associations are the little miniature of ICHS, because in the international commissions there are people from all the countries who meet to discuss a topic, so their ambition is truly global. They are the real actors in ICHS now. Our aim is to represent all continents and all historical periods. Since I have taken office, there have been six or seven new associations but only one national committee (Serbia). For the next congresses, we are going to mix the international committees in the programme so that the congress participants and the international commissions participants can listen to each other.

How did you get involved with ICHS? As I said, some historians may not even know about ICHS.

The French Committee of Historians has always been very important. When I was a student, I had two professors who were involved. One was René Girault, who was a member of the Commission on the History of International Relations, and the other was Bernard Michel, known to Czech historians. He was working in the Commission on Slavic Historical Studies. It was thanks to them that I got involved in ICHS, in these two commissions. I have been a member of these international commissions but never taken part in the French National Committee of Historians. Perhaps this is because my profile as a historian is not French, but more Central Europe and international relations. So I joined through these two commissions, which are still very active today.

How did you become President ?

I was in these affiliated commissions, and Robert Frank was an important member in the International Relations Commission. He became General Secretary of ICHS. He was looking for a successor and he came across me. He pushed me, a bit forcefully, saying that there was a tradition of having a French President or a General Secretary. That is how I became General Secretary and then President.

What does the Presidency mean to you? On a personal and scientific level?

As General Secretary I worked a lot, I work less now because I have a wonderful General Secretary who does the “dirty work”. He does the statistics, writes the letters, takes care of the website, and so on. What this brings us is that we are in direct contact with the world, because as a specialist in Central Europe, what would I have done with a Japanese or Chinese historian? And that is what we need to tell our young colleagues, because we have a problem with young people. Now, thanks to the Internet, thanks to globalization, a young historian from, let’s say, Olomouc, working on Olomouc, can say to himself/herself: I do not need ICHS, I can be global without it. But we will say: this is not true, because you are never going to meet a Japanese if you do not attend the congress.

So the importance of ICHS lies in organising a congress where historians from all over the world meet to discuss various historical topics that cut across different historical periods.

These big conferences still have the advantage of bringing people together in real life. When the Covid pandemic happened, someone suggested we should have an online congress (which was planned for 2020). We said: No way. We would rather postpone or cancel it. We are never going to do an online congress with more than a thousand people. It is just not possible. For young people, it is about opening up to the world, but not through the Internet, but through meetings, through panels that are trans-temporal and trans-national. There is this desire to open up the world of historians. The members of the ICHS Board are historians working on different periods and different themes, so it helps us to manage it all better.

What should young historians who read this interview do if they want to attend a congress of ICHS?

They have to get involved. How do they do that? They have to contact the national committee of their country or go on the Internet in order to contact one of the

affiliated commissions and say I am so and so, I am working on this and that, I am interested in joining.

In other words, they cannot participate directly, only through committees or associations?

Yes, the call for participation is sent to the members and the committees and associations themselves make their calls. They send us their proposals. All the proposals received are examined by the ICHS Board which makes a preliminary selection, and then the General Assembly votes on them. Sometimes it is necessary to group the topics, so that they are more likely to be accepted by the Board. We receive hundreds of proposals. We always advise to sort things out before sending them to us.

I know that the committees and associations have to pay the membership fee, but the amount is not indicated on the ICHS website.

No, the finances are complicated in ICHS. It is paid in Swiss francs, but we will say EUR 600 for the commissions and EUR 800 for the committees. Of course, we are well aware that some committees cannot manage that. It is not so much a question of the country as the status of the committee or association. Georgia - it is not a rich country, let's say, but it is the Academy of Sciences that pays, the State. In Australia, on the other hand, they have a voluntary association and they pay the membership themselves. So we have introduced a variable payment system. In other words, if a committee is active and proposes panels, comes to general assemblies, is dynamic and cannot pay, we tell them: listen, pay what you can. If it is EUR 100, it is EUR 100; if it is EUR 50, it is EUR 50. If it is 800, fine. Then the committee or the commission has to write to the Treasurer and say sorry, we are a small association and we cannot pay. We will manage. But people have to be active.

Has an association or a commission ever been expelled from ICHS because it did not pay?

It states in the statutes that a committee or commission that has not paid for five years will be expelled. This pretext was used to exclude Belarus which had never participated in anything. In the context of the war in Ukraine, we were attacked because of Russia's participation. The problem is that the Russians are paying, and even now they are doing everything to remain members of ICHS. So the Russians do not want to get out and we do not have the right to kick them out. We have kept

the Ukrainians in even though they paid a long time ago, it is symbolic. We are bending our rules a bit.

What are the membership fees collected from the commissions and associations used for?

We use them for ICHS, for operations and to finance congresses. In particular, at the occasion of the congresses, there is what we call the Solidarity Fund. There are two Solidarity Funds. One is ours, at ICHS, and comes from this money, and there is another Solidarity Fund that the congress organisers have to set up themselves. This is used to pay for transport and accommodation for people who are invited to panels but cannot attend because of lack of funds. It is used to support the participation either of colleagues who are not young and who come from countries that are completely disadvantaged, or for young people who take part in poster sessions or panels and who do not have the means to travel and be accommodated.

Are the Board members entitled to any remuneration?

No, our work is voluntary, we are only reimbursed for our travel expenses when we go somewhere. Because when we travel, it is the country that invites us and has to provide us with accommodation. For example, last year the General Secretary and I went to Israel to prepare for the Congress. So the Israelis housed us and ICHS paid for the travel costs.

What else does the membership fee of the committees and associations go towards?

We have also funded the International Prize for History, which celebrates the achievements of historians who have made a name for themselves in the field of history. When a candidate is selected, the medal is awarded at the General Assembly and the Congress. It is very nice if the laureate's country is involved in the ceremony. In Poznań, the winner was Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and it was the Indian Embassy in Warsaw that travelled to Poznań and hosted the Indian reception. In Tokyo, the laureate is Laura de Mello e Souza, a well-known Brazilian scholar and the first woman to be awarded the prize, and the ceremony and following reception will take place at the Brazilian Embassy. (<https://www.cish.org/index.php/en/2024/01/24/laura-de-mello-e-souza-awarded-the-2024-international-prize-for-history-cish/>).

Are you personally satisfied with the way ICHS works?

We are never satisfied, we can always do better. We are increasingly caught up in geopolitics. First Covid, then the war in Ukraine, now Israel, and our colleagues are more and more aware of this.

Have there been tensions within ICHS caused by geopolitics? How has this affected the organisation of international congresses?

In agreement with the Jerusalem organising committee, it was proposed to postpone the congress that was to be held in 2026 in Jerusalem, until 2028. Some international associations and some committees have refused to go to a country whose government is conducting a policy of aggression against the Gaza Strip. Obviously, I have to say quite honestly that the tone of some of the emails was not very positive. Personally, I found it hard to accept, hard to swallow, but we were risking a boycott. We risked killing ICHS if we did not listen. We risked turning the General Assembly in Tokyo into a confrontation, so we worked with our Israeli colleagues. What is very unfair is that all our colleagues are against their own government. I was at the demonstrations with them in Tel Aviv against the Netanyahu government at that time. So I think they have been punished for that and they feel it very painfully as well. The American committee was also under pressure from the universities where student protests took place. This generates problems that go beyond the scope of our own office. Our Israeli colleagues have accepted the solution of postponing the Congress until 2028. What we are going to propose, however, is that we reduce the time between the congresses. Because five years is too long. People forget, they do not participate. This will allow us to hold the General Assembly right in the middle, so the next congress will take place in 2032.

I assume that Russia's attack on Ukraine has also had an impact on the functioning of ICHS.

The Board issued a statement immediately after Russia's aggression in Ukraine. This was not appreciated by certain committees, committees that are more or less far from Russia. So there were no Russians in Poznań, we adopted the policy of the Olympic Games: if Russian colleagues want to come themselves, it is possible. The only thing we were afraid of was that Russia would cut off online access (a few Russian colleagues joined online). That is what happened to the Chinese. The Chinese were cut off from the Internet in Poznań. On the other hand, there were a lot of Ukrainians, there were Ukrainians already in Poland, and in addition we

invited other Ukrainians to attend the congress free of charge through the Solidarity Fund.

Can we say that ICHS plays an important role in the development of world historiography? Can ICHS contribute in any way?

Since the Jerusalem Congress has been postponed, we will celebrate our centenary in 2026 in Leipzig from 26 to 29 August. We will be calling on all the committees and commissions to set up historiography panels. A questionnaire will be sent out, you will see.

I like the idea of making a historiographical inventory on the occasion of the Centenary Congress. I could be wrong, but I have the impression that ICHS is more dynamic today than it was in the past, when it could have given the impression of a certain stagnation and obsolescence.

And it was opaque, with not much transparency. It is true that ICHS is now absorbing fashionable themes. Several times we have had the environment, postcolonial, non-human, animal turn, digital turn. We are dealing with new themes that our predecessors were not doing. Previously, conferences were dominated by older colleagues. The whole profession is getting younger, and ICHS is consequently getting younger too. It is more flexible and more welcoming. It has become more feminised and globalised, and has moved away from Eurocentrism; for example, Latin America has been very important at the last two congresses.

We can expect other changes to follow.

In 2026, the Leipzig congress will be very important, because on the third day there is going to be the General Assembly, and virtually the entire ICHS Board will have to be renewed. It is going to be a big moment, very, very important. Apart from one person, everyone is leaving. We absolutely need candidates for the Board. It is the balance of the continents that matters. We have to take gender into account, but now we are well on the way to parity, and age, because the problem we have had in the last few Boards is that we have taken on people who are excellent scholars but who were already reaching the age limit (70). That is why we have this problem in 2026. We absolutely need younger but also experienced people.

The final question. What will the future of ICHS be like in, say, thirty years?

All I am hoping for is more young people. It is true that we find it hard to get young people to come to the congress. We have done poster sessions and research forums, so why not organise a summer school during the congress? But that will depend on who organises the next congress, in 2032.

And that is of great interest to us in Prague and the Czech Republic. Thank you very much for this interview.

The interview was conducted by Radmila Švaříčková Slabáková

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