
In Memoriam

OBITUARY

Heidemarie Uhl (1956–2023): In Memoriam

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When I received the sad news of Heidemarie Uhl's unexpected passing on 11 August 2023, at the age of 67, I couldn't believe it. Although we were aware of her illness, which was why the presentation of a commemorative publication in her honor had to be postponed, Heidemarie was still active—as she had been throughout her life—and could be reached by email until the end.

As strange as it may sound for a historian, it is not easy to reconstruct precise memories of encounters with her. Our earliest meeting, around twenty-five years ago, was dedicated to an idea that had plagued the Austrian public and the contemporary history research community for decades—the establishment of a House of Austrian History, modeled on the House of History of the Federal Republic of Germany. At the time, Heidemarie Uhl was already a highly innovative historian, having written an extraordinary dissertation under the supervision of Hellmuth Konrad in Graz titled “Between Reconciliation and Destruction. The Controversy of Austria's Historical Identity Fifty Years after the ‘Anschluss.’” For me, she is the spokesperson of the cultural turn in Austrian historical studies. Between 1994 and 2000, she also made an outstanding contribution to the major project “Modernity—Vienna and Central Europe around 1900.”

In 1996, she came to Vienna to the Austrian Academy of Sciences (OeAW) and, after her habilitation, developed an important teaching career in Graz and at the University of Vienna. For Heidemarie Uhl, the primary aim was not to pursue a typical academic career and become a professor, but rather to support and implement history policy in the public sphere with academic expertise. Most recently, for example, we served together with Barbara Staudinger and Mechtild Widrich on a working group, which she led, to prepare for the competition for the redesign and contextualization of the Karl Lueger monument. She had previously chaired the Vienna Monument Preservation Committee for many years. Heidemarie Uhl was also a fixture internationally at conferences and in publications and, as Aleida Assmann put it perfectly in an obituary, she was always very quick to receive and respond to current debates.

When the then-State Secretary at the Federal Chancellery and later Federal Minister, Josef Ostermayer, finally and diplomatically untied the Gordian knot concerning the establishment of a House of Austrian History, Heidemarie Uhl, as my deputy in a thirty-one-member commission with outstanding international members, lent truly sustained and committed support. This enabled us to present a genuine implementation strategy and circumvent the massive resistance within the Austrian People's Party and the blockade policy of the Freedom Party of Austria and some sections of the Greens. After Ostermayer's successor, Thomas Drozda, unnecessarily scaled back the project, Heidemarie Uhl designed several important exhibitions for the House of History in the Neue Burg in Heldenplatz, placing the main focus on a critical approach to the National Socialist terror and extermination policies and their aftermath.

I miss Heidemarie Uhl very much. She was an incredibly clever academic with immense social skills and a kindness that is rather rare in our business. At the same time, she addressed her historical-political concerns resolutely and with convincing arguments. It is no coincidence that she was honored with many eulogies at her funeral. Critically, I would like to point out that she deserved membership in the OeAW during her lifetime—although as a keen analyst of Austrian historical traditions, she would have seen through this paradox.

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