Stefan Guth (Berne):

“Science knows no frontiers, but those who guard the frontiers often know little about science.”

This appraisal gained its author, the renowned medievalist Aleksander Gieysztor, generous applause among the attendees of the historical section at the Second Congress of Polish Science in 1973. It was understood by many as a comment on the on-going work of the Joint German-Polish Textbook Commission (JTC), which, at the time, had progressed far enough to suggest encouraging potential for scholarly agreement in key questions of the German-Polish past, but whose success seemed jeopardized by the persistence of nationalist narratives in the politics of history in both countries.

Granted, Gieysztor’s juxtaposition of cosmopolitan science and nationalist politics was all too clear-cut. There could be no denying that historiography and politics had in many cases joined forces in perpetuating nationalist narratives after 1945. But Gieysztor was right in pointing out that Polish historiography had come a long way since the days when German-Polish relations had been cast exclusively in terms of one-dimensional ethnically and nationalized narratives. Coming to terms with the German-Polish past in the 1970s still implied acknowledging the continued significance of national categories, but it also required that these categories be deemphasized and complemented by alternative frameworks of interpretation, so as to render the shared past more malleable.

In my paper, I will argue that the JTC reaped the benefits of paradigmatic shifts that had long been in the making in German and Polish academia. German historians’ growing willingness to confront National Socialism without spurious considerations for a questionable national interest led their Polish counterparts to eventually abandon the assumption of a comprehensive negativity of German history in favour of a surprisingly multi-faceted and nuanced view of Germany’s historical role in Europe. An analysis of the Poznan-based project of a comprehensive Polish History of Germany – notably the first attempt of its kind in the People’s Republic, initiated in the mid-1970s – will serve to highlight these developments.