

David Zell

Doctoral researcher

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About

PhD title: Major cultural commemorations and the construction of cultural & political identity in the GDR, 1959-1983

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[PhD German Studies \(/postgraduate/courses/research/lang/german-studies.aspx\)](/postgraduate/courses/research/lang/german-studies.aspx)

After taking early retirement from a 39 year international business career David resumed formal academic studies and in 2012 completed a two-year part-time MA course in History (European) at Kingston University; his dissertation examined Beethoven's birth bicentenary in 1970 and the significance of classical music in the GDR. For his PhD project David has won a full Arts and Humanities Research Council Studentship.

Research

My PhD thesis explores how state-sponsored commemorations of major German cultural figures shaped cultural and political memory in the GDR. The research investigates the bicentenaries of Schiller and Beethoven, and quincentenaries of Dürer and Luther as four comparable case studies spanning a 24 year timeframe, and stretching across different strands of German cultural heritage.

The primary research question asks how these commemorations were designed, executed and received and whether there was a lasting legacy. The central research problem is linked to ongoing historiographical debates on the conceptualisation of the GDR; By including Oral History as one of the research methods, it also adds a relevant social history perspective as original contribution to interpreting what kind of society the GDR was.

The project combines a detailed historiographical study of how cultural commemorations were proposed and negotiated with recent studies in cultural memory. It thereby develops an innovative and original approach to understanding how commemorations as a politically designated instrument of cultural memory are developed over time in a state dominated by a single Party and ideological structure.