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Pence teaches, studies the history of Germany

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

"I'm really happy to talk about history because I find it a very exciting thing that helps us to understand the present and figure out how to analyze all the different things around us." That is the way Dr. Katherine Pence explains why studying history is important beyond the stereotype of being a subject about dates and names.

"It's good to have few dates in mind so you can figure out causes and effects and what comes before and after a certain date, such as the end of World War II in 1945. The world changed dramatically after that date," Pence explains. "The most important thing is to figure out how to analyze what was going on in the past in order to deconstruct and figure out how we got to where we are today."

A native of Oxford, England, she received her bachelor's degree from Pomona College in California and a master's and doctorate from the University of Michigan. Today she is an associate professor and department chair in the Department of History of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences in Baruch College.

Pence has specialized in the history of one of the most influential countries in the world: Germany. "I do have German heritage. My ancestors came over in the 19th century, and I studied the German language in both middle school and high school, and I remember certain things, like how people talked about Germany in terms of the Nazi period, how prominent that was in people's memory," says Pence.

"When I was in elementary school, there was a little German kid. The others didn't know how to pronounce his name, and these kids were calling him a Nazi. I just thought it was very interesting to think about. How do you recover as a country from that cataclysmic destruction of democracy?" she says. And that is why she specialized in postwar history.

Instead of looking at the history that most people have heard about, she approached the question by studying how women and other everyday actors



Dr. Pence at her office.

experienced big changes in political regimes and events. "What I liked was how history allows you to look at all different kinds of sources, whether it's literature or statistical data or material objects, and to analyze those historically, which provides us with a lot of fertile ground to understand where we are today."

One of the topics she studies is how the citizens of the former East Germany adapted to their integration into a unified democratic German state. "They weren't just pure victims of a regime but also had their own integrity, and they were developing a culture that was somewhat separate from West Germans. They had gained a lot of strength in navigating the structures of both the difficult political situation and also the constraints of a shortage economy, which meant that a lot of things were not

available much of the time. They figured out really ingenious ways to work around the limited opportunities they had on the market," explains Pence.

What makes this process really complicated is the fact that at the same time the Germans, "have really been trying to work through their Nazi past, much more so than the United States has with its history of slavery. I think that's something that the Germans have been really concertedly focusing on just in the past couple of decades. I think that trying to maintain this openness to the world is a way to atone for those past legacies of fascism."

As a good historian, she visits the country she studies to grasp subtle things that cannot be found in any book. "My first experience in Germany was in 1989, in the spring before the wall came down. I was living in West Berlin, and there were American

troops all over the place. It was really interesting to have a large military presence there that I wouldn't experience even in the United States. There's been a very close relationship between the U.S. and Germany from that time, and that's continued. We have this very close strategic collaboration with our European partners, and so that's something that has been stabilizing Europe after the war," she says.

Now Pence is working on another project, which is related to Germany's relationship with Africa after the 1960s and examines how the Cold War and decolonization fit together. "Specifically, there were some mobile exhibitions that the West Germans put on in a variety of African countries. These trucks rolled throughout the countries and displayed what West Germany was all about. It was an education system; they had a display of the Berlin Wall; and they were trying to gain partners and allies in Africa. So, there was a lot of hopefulness about Africa in its new future, as these newly independent countries were coming out of imperialism. I think Germany was interested in hooking its own future as a demilitarized, post-Nazi state to the future of this new Africa."

Pence discovered that although the German government had good intentions, they whitewashed their own history in Africa. "They conveniently glossed over that past—there was the genocide that the Germans committed against the Herero tribe in Africa, for example. But Germany had its colonies taken away after World War I, and they were given to the French and the British. In the '60s, the French and the British were experiencing these colonial revolutionary struggles, but Germany could conveniently forget about it because they already had had their colonies taken away. So, they came in and said, 'We're gonna be your partners in progress.'"

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/205436714>

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Photo by Yulia Rock