

Call for Papers

Between Localisation and Globalisation: Airports and Berlin-Brandenburg's Interconnectedness with the World

Academic Conference of the Historical Commission of Berlin
Berlin, 28/29 May 2026

Even more than other transport infrastructure, airports symbolise the promise of mobility and the connection of local areas to the world. For the cosmopolitan city of Berlin, it was only logical to orientate the airport on Tempelhof Field, which opened in 1923, towards German and soon also international mass air traffic at an early stage. The rise of civil air traffic following the Paris Convention of 21 May 1926 enabled the worldwide transfer of goods, people and knowledge/ideas via the Berlin hub - and changed the capital and its surrounding areas permanently. Since then, diverse encounters and interactions across national borders have left deep marks in the cultural profile of the city and the region. At the same time, transnational integration processes have always been in a conflict-laden interrelationship with opposing movements of demarcation and containment.

Based on 100 years of civil aviation in Germany, the conference of the Historical Commission of Berlin on 28 and 29 May 2026 will take the anniversary as an opportunity to shed light on the history of aviation infrastructure in Berlin and Brandenburg from its beginnings to the present day. The airports in the capital region did not only write international architectural, technical and transport history. As hubs, they rather put local history in a global temporal and spatial context and are therefore the starting point and object of analysis for a history of the region's transformation through its interdependencies with the world.

The conference will therefore address the following key questions:

1. Why and under what conditions did the metropolis of Berlin and the surrounding area of Brandenburg develop into a hub for global air traffic?
2. Which actors (with which interests) were behind the creation of the necessary infrastructure for civil aviation?
3. How did the construction, operation and closure of airports change the capital region?
4. What local characteristics and global trends can be identified in relation to the social appropriation and impact of aviation infrastructure?

5. the aim of the conference is to examine the transformation of the capital region through its aviation infrastructure in terms of cultural history, entangled history and sociology of space – using the socio-political fields of ‘power’, ‘mobility’ and ‘migration’.

Power - Why have airports in the capital region since their beginnings served political actors as projection surfaces to (re)produce social structures, (de)legitimise rule and think, plan and implement future scenarios? How did airport architecture and technology reflect the politicisation of aviation infrastructure? Which fundamental socio-political questions of cooperation and conflict as well as the shaping of social change were negotiated through the construction, operation and closure of airports in Berlin and Brandenburg?

Mobility - How did the processes of metropolisation and the emergence of mass air travel at the beginning of the 20th century influence each other? To what extent did the development and modernisation of airports, as well as security measures in air traffic, affect the mobility and travel options of different population groups? What social and ecological challenges arose from the expansion and operation of large airports in the region, and what reactions did they provoke?

Migration - What role did airports play in the processes of global migration, flight and displacement and how did they influence social constructions of belonging and foreignness through regulations on entry, immigration and the treatment of migrants? How are the historical and contemporary experiences of borders of migrants and refugees reflected in the processes of aviation infrastructure? What traces of migration history(ies) does a look at the Berlin and Brandenburg airports reveal and how has migration shaped the region?

We look forward to proposals for individual papers or entire panels from academics who deal with at least one of the aspects mentioned in their research. We are planning an interdisciplinary conference at which both early career scientists and experienced researchers can participate. Presentations should not exceed twenty minutes. We are trying to cover an expense allowance, but are not yet able to make a definitive commitment. A publication of the contributions is planned.

Please send your abstracts (max. 2,000 characters, in German or English) and a short CV by 31 January 2025 to the Historical Commission of Berlin - info@hiko-berlin.de.