GASTVORTRAG

Mittwoch, 16. Januar 2019, 16 Uhr c.t.
Raum: VG 2.45

Dr. Mathias Grote
Humboldt Universität Berlin

From Science History to the History of Science?
Chemistry's Past in Gmelin's Handbuch der
anorganischen Chemie, 1930s-1960s

Modern scientific handbooks were household names to scientists—Beilstein and Gmelin to chemists, Bergey’s Manual to microbiologists, or Hagers Handbuch to pharmacists. These heavy tomes were consulted daily for reference, and they were taken to state the last word on many matters. This talk characterizes the handbook as a pivotal medium of the 20th century sciences, which took a role nowadays adopted by databases or Wikipedia. At the example of “Gmelin’s Handbuch der anorganischen Chemie,” a reference book detailing on the properties of chemical compounds, which has been re-edited since 1817, the talk will analyze how scientists managed to extract and compile encyclopedic knowledge on substances from table salt to uranium, and how they attempted to fit this knowledge between the covers of a book – an enterprise taking more than 70 years and 700 volumes for the 8th edition. Interestingly, the Handbuchwissenschaft (Ludwik Fleck) appears entangled with the historiography of science. During National Socialism and afterwards, the Gmelin devoted entire volumes to the history of each element – sulphur, iron, gold etc. What were the epistemic and/or political motivations of writing and editing scientists to become interested in the past of their discipline, what type of historiography did they produce, how did they interact with historians of science? Not least, these entanglements of the handbook and history invite us to reflect on our own discipline’s past.


Zum Gastvortrag ergeht herzliche Einladung