DEATH IN MODERN GERMANY

Conference at the University of Virginia, November 7–9, 2003. Conveners: Paul Betts (Sussex University), Alon Confino (University of Virginia), Dirk Schumann (GHI). Participants: Simone Ameskamp (Georgetown University), Richard Bessel (University of York), Monica Black (University of Virginia), Michael Geyer (University of Chicago), Svenja Goltermann (Universität Bremen), Dagmar Herzog (Michigan State University), Martina Kessel (Universität Bielefeld), Habbo Knoch (Universität Göttingen), Werner Kremp (Atlantische Akademie Rheinland-Pfalz), Kerstin Rehwinkel (Universität der Bundeswehr, Hamburg), Kay Schiller (University of Durham), Felix Robin Schulz (University of York), Daniel Steuer (University of Sussex).

As the twentieth century recedes into history, historians take stock of its legacies. Isaiah Berlin, who lived through most of the century, noted that, although he had not suffered personal hardship, "I remember it only as the most terrible century in Western history." In a century characterized by wars, mass death, and genocides, Germany predictably occupies a special place. A spate of recent publications on the Third Reich and the Holocaust has put death and destruction at the center of Nazi worldview and practice. But while we know a great deal about the Nazi death cult and the killing fields of Nazi-occupied Europe, the broader understanding and meaning of death for Germans both before and after the Nazi period—with the possible exception of soldiers' experiences in the First World War—are still quite unknown.

The aim of this conference was to think through some of the problems, connections, and approaches of the history of death in modern German history, particularly in the twentieth century. Is it possible to imagine a more comprehensive history of death in this century, a history that does not begin and end with the Third Reich? If—as Paul Celan famously wrote—"death is a master from Germany," what developments and forms did death take over the decades? What were the rituals of death in the private sphere, in the family, in cemeteries, near the patient's bed at the hospital? How important were the churches and synagogues—that is, religion—in framing the understanding of death, identity, and citizenship? When and how was death politicized, when and how was it privatized? Did these changes necessarily follow political events? How did the short-term cataclysmic violence of the world wars affect long-term patterns of mourning, burial, and grief? The conference organizers invited junior and senior scholars from Germany, Great Britain, and the United States to explore these clusters of topics. Most of the papers fo-

cused on the twentieth century, with several papers discussing earlier periods. They examined a wide range of themes.

Kerstin Rehwinkel explored the origins of a new attitude toward death during and after the Enlightenment in her paper on "'Apparent Death' Discourse in Germany in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century: Body, Science, and Society." Rehwinkel noted that the discourse about "apparent death" began in Paris in the 1740s, leading to the creation of life-saving institutions and methods of treating the "apparently" dead all over Europe, with Hamburg being the first German city to implement them. Reformers only gradually succeeded in overcoming the general public's fear of becoming contaminated by touching the dead, however, particularly the corpses of suicides. Rehwinkel pointed out that as physicians replaced priests as the final authority on death, the question of how exactly to define dying and death took on a new meaning. Simone Ameskamp examined the rise of cremation in her paper "Phoenix and Prometheus—Cremation in Imperial and Weimar Germany." The first crematorium in modern Germany was built in Gotha in 1878. Urban Protestants constituted the backbone of the cremation movement. They emphasized the modernity, cleanliness, and dignity of the practice, and linked it to German values. While their Protestant opponents rejected cremation mainly as not in line with tradition, Catholics until 1963 were supposed to heed a papal decree banning it. Drawing upon statistical evidence that showed a steady growth of cremation, Ameskamp argued that the world wars had little impact on its acceptance.

Michael Geyer's paper "Death and Killing on the Western Front" pointed to the difference between the actual experience of killing and dying in the First World War and the way killing and dying were subsequently narrated and commemorated. While Verdun has served throughout the century as the defining image of death in the Great War, in reality, the highest death rates occurred during the war of movement in 1914, and also especially on the Eastern Front into the summer of 1915 and again in the spring and summer of 1918. Moreover, the idea of death taking place in one dramatic moment did not reflect reality: most men died slowly, from shrapnel wounds caused by artillery fire. Geyer showed that German soldiers were tremendously effective killers, far more so than their counterparts. This resulted from a change from parade-oriented to combat-oriented training. Learning how to survive on the battlefield meant learning how to overcome fear, the dominant soldierly emotion, and how to fight aggressively and efficiently. It resulted in a "defensive aggressiveness" that, Geyer concluded, came to be the basis of the modern practice of war.

Martina Kessel discussed how humor served as an instrument to cope with death in her paper "Laughing about Death: Humor in both

World Wars." Over the course of the nineteenth century, she argued, a particular German concept of humor had developed that explicitly rejected irony and focused on telling the truth. The humorous soldier became part of this concept from the 1860s on. In World War I, German propaganda used jokes to counter stories of German atrocities and to help soldiers come to terms with the unpredictability of death by inverting the stereotypes used by enemy propaganda and emphasizing the value of order. Following the Nazi stormtroopers' keeping of this tradition of humor during the Weimar Republic, Nazi propaganda in World War II largely avoided referring to the different character of that war. At the same time, a culture of oral jokes (*Flüsterwitze*) emerged among the population that included addressing the murderous policy of the regime, albeit indirectly and leaving out Himmler.

Habbo Knoch examined problems and strategies of representation in his paper "Pictures of Death after both World Wars." He argued that the experience of World War I had created a "crisis of representation." Prewar portraits of soldiers stood in stark contrast to the depersonalized images of destruction that the war had produced, rendering the integration of violence into its visual representation impossible. Strategies to cope with this problem focused on the "spiritual," the "heroic," and the "realistic presence" of the dead. Moreover, as Knoch pointed out, images of the dead were used for political purposes from the very beginning of the war, aimed at evoking strong emotions for and against fighting it. When the Spanish Civil War added the motif of wounded children to the images of civilians harmed by war, all elements of the imagery used later to depict World War II and the Holocaust were already in place.

Alon Confino's paper "Death, Spiritual Solace, and the Afterlife between Nazism and Religion" explored the tension and the commingling between the Nazi attempt to build a revolutionary cultural system and the traditional, mostly religious, rites of death that were notoriously resistant to change. As the Second World War dragged on and the losses mounted, who and what provided spiritual sustenance to the bereaved? Here, argued Confino, were the limits of Nazi ideology and death rituals: the party offered a general truth, and a national, collective cause, but for many religious Germans, it could not quite offer personal redemption and promise of an afterlife. The Nazis could not monopolize the spiritual element in death in a society that was largely religious, while the church provided spiritual assistance in death, but in language that often provided support to the regime. The point is not that Nazism "lost" or "won" against religion; it is rather that "lived" Nazism—the way people actually experienced it—successfully blended Nazi and religious practices.

Attitudes toward and experience of death in and immediately after 1945 were the focus of Richard Bessel's paper, "Death in Germany: The

Shock of 1945," and Monica Black's contribution, "A Dialectic of Loss: Death in Postwar Berlin." Bessel described the German landscape of 1945 as littered with corpses, and speculated on the meaning for Germans of confronting these corpses. While the Allies attempted to confront the Germans with the death they had wrought, the general German response in the "shock of 1945" was a heightened sense of the Germans' own victimhood, even in the face of the corpses that were the product of crimes committed "in the name of the German people." Black discussed the forced coexistence of death and life in postwar Berlin, and the various ways in which, long after the death and killing associated with the war were over, death continued to stalk the Berlin landscape and the imaginations of Berliners. The coexistence of death and life prevented the war from being "properly over" in the minds of many Berliners, faced as they were with the ongoing prospect of the exhumations of their loved ones or the uncertainty of the fates of the war missing.

Svenja Goltermann's paper "The Imagination of Disaster: Death and Survival in Postwar Germany" and Dagmar Herzog's contribution "Sex and Death" explored the tortuous mix of acknowledgment and denial toward mass death during the 1950s in West Germany. Goltermann criticized historians for treating the concept of trauma as self-evident, although it has a history and postwar contemporaries did not yet use it. Drawing upon psychiatric case files of former soldiers, women on the homefront, and Jewish survivors, Goltermann pointed out that their memories of the war experiences were constructs, mediating past elements by postwar language, imagination, and *ex post* knowledge. German society in the 1950s, Goltermann argued, was a "society driven by Angst" that expressed this fear in multiple and dissonant voices. Herzog posed the question of why West Germany directed so much energy toward policing sexual behavior in the 1950s. She argued that policing sexuality was a displacement of moral discourse from "genocide to genitals," as part of the attempted rechristianization of postwar Germany. Sex became, according to Herzog, a site of "memory management" that sought to redress the sexual license of the Nazi period and, by extension, the Nazi past altogether by reaffirming conservative sexual mores and condemning premarital sex and abortion in particular.

Werner Kremp outlined his project of a yearbook on political thanatology with the aim of elucidating the effects of death on politics and political behavior during the past five decades. He suggested that generational differences in political styles were directly linked to the experience of war and mass death and the lack thereof, and he defined the change over time from religious to non-religious forms of public mourning as a major object of research. Paul Betts explored a different perspective of the official postwar culture of death in his paper "When Cold

Warriors Die: The Commemorative Deaths of Konrad Adenauer and Walter Ulbricht," about the funerals of Adenauer and Ulbricht as a means of state self-representation. Adenauer's funeral allowed for a public confirmation of Germany's integration in the West, rapprochement with France, and *Wiedergutmachung* with Israel. Adenauer was styled as a redeemer, but more importantly, as a civil servant of the state to which he bore allegiance. In the case of Ulbricht, although at the time of his death he had fallen from the party's grace and become an *Unperson*, the resonance of his death with the people of the GDR was remarkable and had to be recognized by the SED. His funeral both affirmed his status in the history of German Communism and confirmed his status as private citizen devoted to public work. Significantly, narratives of aggrieved nationalism, tragedy, and heroism were absent in both funerals. These ceremonies were not about nation-building; rather, they represented the internalization of the division of Germany and the allegiance of each man to his state.

In his paper "Death in Munich: The 1972 Olympic Games," Kay Schiller examined the conflict between the intended image of the 1972 Olympics and the tragedy of the massacre of the Israeli athletes. The Munich Games used an aesthetic approach that eschewed politics in their attempts to overcome the 1936 Berlin Olympics precedent. The image projected at the Munich Olympics stressed a cosmopolitan, peace-loving Germany, and wedded technology to aesthetics that placed emphasis on clarity, lightness, and transparency. This aesthetic was the inversion of the monumental, ponderous scale of Berlin in 1936. In the aftermath of the murder of the Israeli athletes, Schiller argued, the discourse that arose conflated the victims and their Olympic hosts—hosts whose technocratic "mega show" had been spoiled by politics. Felix Robin Schulz discussed in his paper "Death in East Germany, 1945–1990" the changing burial practices under communism. Why were these practices, so notoriously resistant to change, so thoroughly transformed in East Germany? The war, argued Schulz, had little impact on them, as they returned to traditional forms almost immediately after the war had ended. While there was a desire in the SED to create burial practices that were socialist in content, Schulz suggested that the dramatic changes that eventually occurred in East Germany (resulting, for example, in the development of *Urnengemeinschaftsgräber*) were largely caused by material constraints rather than ideological motives.

Daniel Steuer explored the writings of the late W.G. Sebald in "European Melancholy: Sebald and Death." Sebald, argued Steuer, presents us with a unique case of a German writer who, through the use of an aesthetic strategy that Steuer refers to as "critical melancholy," was able to write from the perspective of the victims of Nazi terror. The issue of

finding the appropriate language for talking about death associated with the war is key; after all, Jörg Friedrich was not attacked for the historical content of his work but for its tone and his use of emotive language in his account of the air war against Germany and the fire bombings of German cities. Steuer was critical of historians attempting to write about subjects like death in an aesthetically neutral language, and was critical as well of the '68 generation that failed to listen to the war generation and then accused it of not having anything to say about the Nazi past.

These diverse papers stimulated animated discussions. Participants agreed that the topic's crucial issue was how to link long-term trends and short-term disasters on the theoretical as well as on the empirical level. The findings of the papers suggested that continuities were predominant. Neither the two World Wars and the Holocaust nor the changes of political regimes seem to have fundamentally changed burial practices and the language and rites of mourning. "Dignity" remains the key value. As one participant put it, Philip Ariès was perhaps right when he emphasized that long-term trends in the history of death are not directly affected by political events. Given the primacy of the Holocaust in professional and public discourse, this is a point that calls for further scrutiny, not the least with respect to Judaic traditions, which were not explicitly addressed during the conference. Another fundamental issue that emerged in the discussions was the need to explore the changing definitions of death and dying: in other words, to historicize them. The ever-growing influence of medicine over these definitions in the past two centuries would deserve particular attention, as several participants noted. A third major point of discussion was the relationship between the death of soldiers and the representation of the state. Here, at least in Germany, traditional narratives—nationalist and National Socialist—centered on the sacrifice of the fallen were no longer tenable after 1945. How this void was filled and the dead and the living linked in private and public discourse is another topic that deserves further examination.

Dirk Schumann, Monica Black, and Desiree Hopkins