

REVISITING 1806: NAPOLEON AND GERMAN CENTRAL
EUROPE
MID-ATLANTIC GERMAN HISTORY SEMINAR

On Saturday, April 30, 2005, the Mid-Atlantic German History Seminar met at the GHI for its semi-annual meeting. Katherine Aaslestad of West Virginia University presented a very informative historiographical survey of recent interpretations of the Napoleonic occupation of central Europe, focusing on the year 1806. Her essay posed several questions around the themes of state building and consolidation, the nature of early nineteenth-century liberalism, and the relationship between regional culture and the Napoleonic continental system that, according to Aaslestad, "tied into everyone's lives" through taxation, conscription, new judicial systems, and the billeting of soldiers. She concluded that, while the "role of nationalist political discourse" emerging during the French revolutionary and Napoleonic periods continues to occupy historians, "recent studies . . . explore the transformation of political culture." In addition, "gendered representations of patriotism in military and civilian society" coexist with studies of "shifts within local civic identity . . . from the ground up." Historians are posing questions such as: What were the levels of collaboration and/or resistance to occupation in various parts of Germany? Was resistance political or more cultural? She pointed out that, on the eve of the two-hundredth anniversary of 1806, new questions and new studies are demonstrating the complexity of this critical time in German history.

After her overview, based on her paper sent to participants in advance of the seminar, a discussion ensued, beginning with a question about Mack Walker's classic *German Hometowns* that explored this time period. Did local administrators and bureaucrats block reform and hence contribute to a "failed modernization?" Further discussion centered on whether one can use terms such as "modernization" rather than "reform." Recent studies have suggested that resistance to the French have opened up additional questions. For example, were the revolutionary and Napoleonic eras transitional or a dramatic rupture from the eighteenth-century past? Several participants noted that the period was probably a combination of both. Others surmised that examining the period through the lenses of generations and age cohorts may be fruitful. Furthermore, additional fruitful approaches could look at issues of confessionalization and at everyday life under occupation. How varied would everyday experiences be in newly reconstituted entities such as Bavaria? Would comparative studies be helpful in comparing Baden, Württemberg, or Saxony along with Bavaria? Other questions centered on the role of edu-

cation during this era. Participants asked about recent French historians' views regarding the issues of modernization and of resistance in the Rhineland. More broadly, how have these historians characterized the nature of French occupation? How have the French evaluated the economic changes brought about by the continental system? How corrupt was it? For some, according to Aaslestad, Napoleon is still revered as a "unifier" of Europe. Following the description of French efforts at evaluating the period, the seminar's discussion turned to the former GDR's view of the Napoleonic era. Aaslestad noted that one of the best exhibitions was held in Leipzig commemorating the Russian role in the Wars of Liberation. After continued discussion of issues such as the role of the Confederation of the Rhine and the strength of pan-German resistance, the seminar concluded with two additional provocative questions: Was the old Holy Roman Empire, eliminated by Napoleon, really defunct or an early embryo of the EU? And, finally, can sovereign states be formed as a union without the domination of one state?

The next Mid-Atlantic German History Seminar will be held in the fall at Georgetown University. John V. Maciuika of Baruch College, CUNY, will present material from his recently published work, *Before the Bauhaus: Architecture, Politics, and the German State, 1890–1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). For additional information, please contact Marion Deshmukh, Department of History and Art History, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, 22030, mdeshmuk@gmu.edu.

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