

FOURTEENTH ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM OF THE FRIENDS OF THE GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE AND AWARD OF THE FRITZ STERN DISSERTATION PRIZE

Symposium at the GHI, November 18, 2005. Conveners: Gerald D. Feldman (President, Friends of the GHI) and Christof Mauch (GHI). Participants: Eli Rubin (Western Michigan University), Jesse Spohnholz (Grinnell College), Dirk Schumann (GHI). Made possible by a grant from the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

The Friends of the German Historical Institute convened in Washington on November 18, 2005 for their fourteenth annual symposium, chaired by Gerald D. Feldman. The morning session featured the presentation of the Fritz Stern Dissertation Prize, which has been awarded for six years for the two best dissertations in German history at a North American university. This year's prizes were awarded to Jesse A. Spohnholz, who earned his doctorate at the University of Iowa under the supervision of Sarah Hanley and Benjamin Kaplan, for his dissertation "Strangers and Neighbors: The Tactics of Toleration in the Dutch Exile Community of Wesel, 1550–1590," and to Eli Rubin, who earned his doctorate at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, under the supervision of Rudy Koshar, for his dissertation "Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic: Towards an Economic, Consumer, Design and Cultural History." The lectures of the two prize winners are reprinted, in revised form, in the "Stern Prize" section of this *Bulletin*. Fritz Stern attended the award ceremony and gave a comment. The Prize Committee was composed of Doris Bergen (University of Notre Dame), Edward Ross Dickinson (University of Cincinnati), and Kees Gispens (University of Mississippi), who chaired the committee.

The committee cited Spohnholz's dissertation as "a pioneering case study of relations between people of different faiths in the German border town of Wesel in the second half of the sixteenth century," a "micro-history that resonates on a macro-level," which showed that toleration in Wesel "should be seen, not as the precursor of a modern understanding of tolerance and religious pluralism, but rather as a complex, highly significant paradox that centered on the simultaneity of intense conflict and grudging compromise—strong disagreement coupled with reluctant suffering of difference." Rubin was cited for convincingly arguing that the East German "world of plastics generated a kind of consensus, or a community of interest among its various constituencies, which in turn resulted in a type of societal legitimacy" and for showing "the GDR as a complex, functioning system in which plastics—as products of industrial

success, a symbol of national pride, and building blocks of the '1,000 small things of everyday life'—played a central role."

In the afternoon, GHI Deputy Director Dirk Schumann presented results of his current research project in the paper "Spare the Rod? School Discipline in Germany and the USA, 1945–1975." School discipline, he argued, was not merely a technical question of school governance but indicative of broader developments in society. As societies relied increasingly on court decisions and expert advice to settle matters that had previously been decided by administrators and teachers alone, social scientists, legal experts, and judges who remained far removed from day-to-day classroom interaction came to have a direct impact on what happened in the classroom. Focusing on legal issues and drawing in particular upon West German debates about corporal punishment, Schumann showed how the concept of "customary law" (*Gewohnheitsrecht*) retarded change, while references to the constitution gradually helped students gain more rights. As a result, the number of legal regulations and rulings skyrocketed from the late 1960s on. This process of "juridification," Schumann argued, guaranteed new freedoms, but it also created new bureaucratic constraints and stifled pedagogical initiative. In this respect, there were no fundamental differences between West Germany and the United States.

Richard F. Wetzell