

GERMAN INSTITUTES OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY: INTERVIEWS WITH THE DIRECTORS

Gerhard Besier, Konrad Jarausch, Horst Möller, Jan Philipp Reemtsma, and Axel Schildt interviewed by Christof Mauch and Richard F. Wetzell

One feature that distinguishes the field of contemporary history in Germany from contemporary history in the United States and many other countries is the important role of research institutes outside the universities. In the summer of 2005, we interviewed the directors of the five non-degree-granting research institutes devoted primarily to contemporary history, in order to provide our readers with a firsthand account of their history, current research, and some of the issues they face. The first part of this interview feature presents the five institutes in the chronological order of their founding (1949 to 1993). The second part is organized thematically, and presents excerpted comments on selected issues. The five directors were interviewed separately, at their institutes.

I. THE INSTITUTES: HISTORY AND CURRENT RESEARCH

1. Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich-Berlin (IfZ)

The Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich was founded in 1949. Readers interested in the history of the Institute may wish to consult its very informative *Festschrift*, published under the title *50 Jahre Institut für Zeitgeschichte: Eine Bilanz*, edited by Horst Möller and Udo Wengst (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999). The Institute publishes several book series and the journal *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*; published annual reports are also available. The Institute has two departments in Berlin, one for the editing of German diplomatic documents of the FRG, and one for research on the GDR and Eastern European countries. The Institute's website is: www.ifz-muenchen.de. We interviewed Horst Möller, professor of modern and contemporary history at the University of Munich and the author of numerous books, including *Die Weimarer Republik: Eine unvollendete Demokratie* (8th edition, 2006). He is the Institute's director since 1992.

Horst Möller: The origins of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich were of a political nature. The discussions regarding its founding, which date back to 1946, were initiated not by academics, but by politicians,

about evenly divided between SPD and CSU. They wanted to found an institute that would collect and publish documents, and also conduct studies to determine how the Nazi dictatorship came about. Theirs was a fundamentally historical-moral and political-didactic project. But there was a scholarly aspect to this project from the beginning. The founders thought that one could not address National Socialism simply in the form of essays; instead, well-researched studies and document collections were needed. During the 1950s there was a considerable tension between the work of the Institute and politics, not because the politicians opposed the work, but because it was proceeding too slowly for them. Adenauer, for instance, intervened with representatives of the federal government, asking, "Why has the Institute still not produced brochures that explain what leads to murderous anti-Semitism and what leads to dictatorship? We need this for political-didactic reasons." Compared to the early years, the role of politics in the Institute's governing bodies has been greatly reduced. We now have a board comprised of representatives of the federal and state governments, and the academic advisory council is made up entirely of scholars. The academic advisory council offers suggestions for research, but the board does not.

The Institute's research focus has changed in the sense that, when the Institute was established, National Socialism stood at the center. To be sure, from the beginning the institute was charged with examining the causes and effects of National Socialism, which included its roots before 1933 and its legacy after 1945. But the emphasis of the research during the first twenty-five years was clearly on the National Socialist period. The first change was the addition to the research program of the period of occupation from 1945 to 1949, followed in succession by the fifties, sixties, and seventies. We proceed as historians always proceed: when the state records are released after thirty years, then archival research becomes possible. We jump ahead a bit because there are many sources that are not in the state archives. But we usually don't establish large projects until archival materials become accessible on a large scale. This process has now reached the 1970s.

For the institute, *Zeitgeschichte* (contemporary history) has become the history of the twentieth century, beginning with the end of World War I. The Institute concentrates on all epochs of contemporary history, and this is unique compared with the other institutes of contemporary history, most of which focus on National Socialism, the GDR, the interwar period, or the postwar era. At the center of our Institute's work is German history in a European context. We also conduct comparative projects in which non-German history and German history are equally important. One such project is "Germany and France in the Interwar Era," which is not a history of a relationship but a comparison of social, cultural, and

political developments. The Institute's research projects also include, among others: Germany and France between the wars; the rise of the Nazi Party before 1933; the Goebbels diaries; the Wehrmacht in the National Socialist dictatorship, with an emphasis on the war in the east; societies during the air war, comparing Germany with Great Britain; class justice and state terror in the Soviet Occupied Zone and the GDR; a comparative study of social policy and the integration of refugees in the GDR and the FRG; the edition of the foreign-policy records of the Federal Republic; society, state, and modernization in Bavaria from 1949 to 1973; and Germany in the time of reform and revolt (1960s and 1970s). These are projects from all periods of contemporary history, with various methods but with an emphasis on political social history. Quantitatively speaking, research on National Socialism comprises perhaps 30 to 35 percent of the Institute's research. That means that the Institute is still the largest institute for research on the Nazi era, probably worldwide, but certainly in Germany and Europe. We have not reduced research in this area, but we have expanded into other areas. In addition, the Institute runs a permanent documentation exhibit at Berchtesgaden in Obersalzberg. The Institute is also participating in a new, long-term project, financed by the German Research Foundation, that will produce a complete documentation of the persecution and murder of the European Jews.

The Institut für Zeitgeschichte is distinguished from the others first and foremost by being the oldest institute of contemporary history in Germany and, as such, having a long tradition. During the first decades, around 70 to 80 percent of research on contemporary history in Germany took place at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte. This situation changed only in the 1970s with the establishment of university chairs in contemporary history and with the establishment of other institutes, and then, again, quite massively, after reunification in 1990. What then remains unique about our Institute? First, the Institute works on all periods of contemporary history. Second, up until now, none of the other institutes have pursued comparative, that is to say German-European research projects. Third, the sheer size of the institute: about one hundred employees, including about forty scholars. Because the institute is so much larger than the others, it also has a greater research capacity. Fourth, the institute's obligation to provide information and expert statements. During its existence, the institute has produced approximately nine thousand formal expert opinions (*Gutachten*). The most famous are those produced for the Auschwitz trial, published in book form as *Anatomy of the SS-State*. Finally, the institute is unique by virtue of its archive and library. The archive holds the personal papers of hundreds of politicians, diplomats, and scholars; special collections, for example on the White Rose, a students' resistance group against the Nazi dictatorship; the complete

OMGUS files on the American occupation in Germany, which were microfilmed by the National Archives; and the complete files of the Nuremberg Trials. Our library, which holds around 200,000 items, is one of Germany's two great libraries on contemporary history. The Library for Contemporary History within the Wurttemberg State Library in Stuttgart is somewhat larger than ours because it includes a collection on World War I. For the National Socialist period, the library of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte is probably the world's leading library because the Institute has been collecting material since its founding. In addition, it has the advantage that the entire catalogue back to 1949 has been digitized and can be searched online.

2. Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg (FZH)

The Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg was founded in 1960. Readers interested in its history can consult the special issue *Die Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg* of *Auskunft: Mitteilungsblatt Hamburger Bibliotheken* 22 (2002), no. 3. The FZH publishes several book series; among its recent publications is *Hamburg im "Dritten Reich"* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005). The Institute's website is: www.zeitgeschichte-hamburg.de. We interviewed Axel Schildt, professor of modern history at the University of Hamburg and the author of numerous works, including *Zwischen Abendland und Amerika: Studien zur westdeutschen Ideenlandschaft der 50er Jahre* (Munich, 1999). He has served as the Institute's director since 2002.

Axel Schildt: The official mission of the Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg is to investigate the history of the twentieth century, with special emphasis on northern Germany and Hamburg. The institution has historical roots that reach back almost to the end of the Second World War. Already the immediate postwar period witnessed attempts to deal with the Nazi period; for example, a book written by a former director of the State Archive about the end of the Second World War and the peaceful surrender of Hamburg, which amounted to a glorification of the Nazi *Reichsstatthalter* (governor). This resulted in a public scandal from which sprang the first small research institute, called Forschungsstelle für die Geschichte Hamburgs, 1933–1945. It was founded in 1949 and consisted of three researchers and a director, Heinrich Heffter. They gathered source materials in order to later produce a complete history of the era. In the early 1950s the notion was: They might need two years and then they would have finished the job. At the same time, a reinterpretation of history was taking place. This reinterpretation evoked a particular "Hanseatic spirit", used to explain why things did not proceed as brutally

here as they did elsewhere in Germany during the Nazi period. In other words, the locals set themselves apart. So the headline was: "Here everything was not so bad." The research center itself sort of petered out in the mid-1950s and was then refounded after the great wave of anti-Semitic vandalism in 1959–60. In 1960 the Forschungsstelle für die Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus in Hamburg was founded. Werner Jochmann, a student of Hermann Aubin's and also of Fritz Fischer's, became the director and remained in the position until 1987/88. During this time, the Hamburg institute had a strong reputation, especially regarding research on the origins of National Socialism. The institute became known as the "little brother" of the Munich Institut für Zeitgeschichte, and was renowned for its book series "Hamburger Beiträge zur Zeitgeschichte," published from the beginning of the 1960s.

Starting in the mid-1980s, major transformations took place. There was strong criticism from engaged young historians in Hamburg, who accused the institute of writing semi-official history, of producing hagiographic works on social democracy. The core of these intense conflicts of the 1980s was that a new history movement "from below" replaced the official city legend of "Things weren't so bad in Hamburg" with Karl-Heinz Roth's thesis of the "Mustergau [Model District] Hamburg." This thesis argued that Hamburg under National Socialism led the way when it came to social-political mechanisms of repression, for example. This situation was then portrayed as a kind of coalition in which the Nazi Party was only the smaller partner: the larger partner consisted of the financial and industrial powers of the city. This controversy in turn gave rise to efforts to view things in a more differentiated manner and not to adopt the radical position of either thesis.

After Jochmann's departure in 1987/88, the institute was under the leadership of several directors who were there only for a short time: Detlev Peukert, from 1988 until his untimely death in 1990; Ulrich Herbert, from 1992 until his departure in 1995; and Arnold Sywottek, from 1997 until his sudden death in 2000; with acting directors in between. The year 1997 marked an important change, because the institute has borne a different name since then: Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg, instead of Forschungsstelle für die Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus in Hamburg. The new name aims at situating the history of the Third Reich within the history of the twentieth century. In addition, since 1997 we are no longer a municipal agency, but a foundation whose primary funder remains the city of Hamburg; and since 2000, we are also an institute of the University of Hamburg.

"Hamburg in the National Socialist Period" remains a key area of research. In this area we published the book *Hamburg im "Dritten Reich"* in 2005, which makes good on a decades-old political and moral obliga-

tion of the institute to the city of Hamburg. The book is a survey of existing research but is written so as to make it accessible to a broad audience. Besides this, there are four other research areas: (1) Hamburg Elites in the Twentieth Century, including a biography of the entrepreneur Erik Blumfeld, a long-time CDU chairman and member of the Bundestag, who was persecuted by the Nazis; and a project on the history of the Reemtsma company; (2) Power and Persecution from the World Economic Crisis to German Reconstruction; (3) Popular Cultures, including a project on the history of West German youth culture in the 1960s; (4) Hamburg's External Relations, including a study of suburbanization, that is, the suburban life-worlds around Hamburg. The focus on the Third Reich in Hamburg and the region remains the core of the institute's research agenda. In addition, we attempt to broaden our scope to include translocal relations and comparisons between cities.

The first thing that makes the FZH unique is certainly its connection to the history of Hamburg and the region of northern Germany, as well as the fact that we have a research profile strongly influenced by categories of cultural history such as experience and perception. At the same time we are careful not to write a cultural history with the politics left out but rather a cultural history of the political. A third unique aspect is that the institute faces distinct expectations from the city. We must always consider not only the scholarly, but also the urban community. Our library (of around 80,000 volumes) and archive are both open to the public, and we offer regular lecture series, which are widely advertised in the city.

3. Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (HIS)

The Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung was founded in 1984. The institute publishes several book series and the bimonthly journal *Mittelweg 36: Zeitschrift des Hamburger Instituts für Sozialforschung*. Readers interested in the institute's recent research may wish to consult the institute's booklet *Projekte, Veranstaltungen, Veröffentlichungen, 2002–2005*. The institute's website is: www.his-online.de. We interviewed Jan Philipp Reemtsma, professor of modern German literature at the University of Hamburg and the author of numerous publications, including most recently *Folter im Rechtsstaat?* (Hamburg, 2005). Reemtsma founded the institute in 1984 and has served as its director since then.

Jan Philipp Reemtsma: The HIS was founded in 1984 and has gone through various phases. Initially its sole purpose was to fund research projects, and it did not consist of much more than an office. Word spread that this institute had been founded; applications were submitted and

reviewed, and individual projects were selected. My hope at the time was that just by bringing the various projects together once or twice a year, something like a network would develop. That did not happen: Everyone worked in isolation, no one had much time, and some projects were never finished. At some point I realized that this was not what I intended, and that the operation needed to be reshaped into a genuine research institute. That led to the move into our present building in Hamburg at the end of the 1980s. In the course of the 1990s, things took their current shape. In 1995 came another stage in our development, when we presented our research on the theory and history of violence to the public through lecture series, panel discussions, and two exhibitions on the destructive nature of the twentieth century. One of these was the exhibition about the crimes of the Wehrmacht, which occupied us for nearly ten years.

I did not found the institute with the idea of addressing specific subjects but rather with the notion "Let's find out what the subjects are that we would like to know more about, that get under our skin." It turned out that certain subjects recurred. We decided early on to address the reality of state terror. We translated the report *Nunca Mas* of the Argentine investigative commission that came out in 1984. When the Argentine military dictatorship ended, an investigative commission was set up by the new civilian government, and its report was called *Nunca Mas (Never Again): Report of Conadep (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons)*. This is a collection of contemporary documents on the reality of state terror. Something similar is today being published in Chile. Many of those who write on torture as an instrument of governing do not take notice of these sources, perhaps because they are rather horrible to read. But when you analyze them carefully, these works call into question many of the ideas that organizations like Amnesty International use to explain state terror. I noticed that this kind of political violence was not well analyzed. I organized a small conference and wrote on the topic myself. Our research on torture in Argentina became linked to research on Nazism, and thus gave rise to a larger research area on the dynamics of violence in different regimes. This led to the question: How did this work in the Soviet Union? In various regimes extreme violence is applied by the state, but the dynamics of violence are not necessarily the same. This area of research has also recently come to encompass the discussions that have taken place in the United States and in Germany: Is it possible to legalize or at least legitimize torture in a nation where the rule of law applies? I entered this discussion and wrote a book that primarily addresses the legal arguments.

One motive for undertaking research on state terror was the consideration that a significant element in the formation of the European *Rechts-*

staat (states governed by the rule of law) was the banning of torture. Referring to this historical background during the controversy about torture in the Algerian war, Jean-Paul Sartre once said something to the effect that "Once, under the Nazis, torture returned. Who could have imagined that it would be the French, who experienced this firsthand, who have implemented torture again [in the war with Algeria]." When most people speak of torture, they assume that it has nothing to do with them anymore, that it has been overcome, like slavery, and only very strange regimes in the midst of a crisis of civilization, like the Nazis, use it. But when you look into it, you realize that there are many regimes in the world — not only those at the far corners of the earth, but modern societies, rapidly developing nations — who resolutely employ torture in their domestic politics. The return of torture in the twentieth century—the shocking fact that one could even employ this formulation gave rise to this line of inquiry at the Institute. What really happened there? And above all: How can societies return to normal once it has happened? It is a matter not just of recognizing the phenomenon of violence and making the proper expression of consternation, but of understanding violence's power to form society. Traditionally, this phenomenon is viewed thus: Something falls apart, is repaired, and things then go back to normal. This new normality, however, is itself the product of violence. For that reason, this research area now includes research on the Cold War, a time of threatened and real violence in the Third World. This involved constant warfare, with no military conflict between the superpowers, but with a culture of arming, mistrust, threats, and fear. How can one understand this time? We now live in a world that was shaped by this phase, but this organizing element is now gone. The historical present is again the product of a certain balancing out of the means or potential for violence.

There are three main areas of research at the institute: Theory and History of Violence; Society of the Federal Republic; Nation and Society. These research areas are not tied to a particular academic discipline. The goal of the research is theory, a deepened theoretical understanding of society. Works of pure theory should be exceptions, however; normally, theoretical questions are addressed through the treatment of an empirical problem. Finally, the "thorn" of contemporary relevance should remain palpable. I choose this metaphor because we are not about trying to respond to the political topic of the day. On the contrary, it is possible to define what is politically relevant by placing it on the political agenda. The research area Society of the Federal Republic includes the topic "superfluous humans," which explores new social questions, new forms of social inclusion and exclusion. The research area Nation and Society could easily be overwhelmed by the number of possible topics. One of the central issues concerns how certain things are becoming transnational in

Europe (and worldwide), things that have traditionally been national, such as courts and criminal prosecution. This area also includes a project on the subject "Europe of Resentments." Who thinks what about whom? Israel, Islam, Turkey. What are the structures of resentment?

The Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung is distinguished [from the other institutes featured here] because it addresses not only questions of contemporary history but questions from the discipline of sociology as well. Basically, the institute is shaped by sociological and historical perspectives. The combination of these perspectives has been one element of continuity, and will remain so for a long time. An element of discontinuity could be that we might strengthen a third perspective: for example, the juridical perspective. One could imagine establishing another research area that would focus on the intersection of juridical with sociological and historical questions. Another unique aspect of the Institute is that in Germany such institutes are hardly ever the result of private initiative and funding. Germans assume that *Wissenschaft* (scholarship or science) is conducted by the state. During the controversies about our exhibition on the crimes of the Wehrmacht I often heard the comment: "This institute is not a *wissenschaftliches* (scholarly) institute because it is privately financed." In response, I always thought: "Go to the United States and say this sentence and watch what would happen." But the point is that someone could say that here in a newspaper interview without people thinking: "Has the man taken leave of his senses?" But by now our institute is so respected that this remark could come only from someone on the fringe. The three research areas of the Institute are each under the direction of an area head. We agree on the research perspectives, and there is a long-range plan; but the area heads have a lot of leeway. I retain for myself a veto right regarding personnel decisions, but I have not made use of it. And it would be absolutely unacceptable if I tried to force someone on one of the research areas. So there are many self-restrictions in place, which are also set down in written regulations. To be sure, things would be different if there were an academic advisory council or a supervisory board. Such boards will certainly be created some day, when the roles of the Institute's director and founder-benefactor (*Stifter*) will be separated, that is, when I leave the institute someday, either because of death or because I choose to step down.

4. Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung in Potsdam (ZZF)

The Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung was founded in 1992 (initially under the name Forschungsschwerpunkt Zeithistorische Studien). The Institute publishes several book series and two periodicals, the *Potsdamer Bulletin für Zeithistorische Studien* and *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*. Readers interested in the ZZF's recent research may wish to consult its *Tätigkeitsbericht 2001–2003*, published in 2004. The institute's website is: www.zzf-pdm.de. We spoke with Konrad Jarausch, Lurcy Professor for European Civilization at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and the author of many publications, including most recently, *Die Umkehr: Deutsche Wandlungen 1945–1995* (Munich, 2004). Jarausch has served as co-director of the ZZF since 1994; since 2005 his co-director is Martin Sabrow (*geschäftsführender Direktor*), who was unavailable at the time of our interview.

Konrad Jarausch: The ZZF is a product of German unification. Its predecessor, the Forschungsschwerpunkt Zeithistorische Studien, was founded in 1992 to pick up some of the positively evaluated members of the East German Academy of Sciences. The Academy had three institutes of history—one concerned with German history, one focused on world history, *allgemeine Geschichte*; and a third one that had to do with economic and social history. About a dozen and a half scholars were considered to be competent enough and not tarnished by collaboration with the Stasi or the communist party to be allowed to continue to do research. Added to this core was a group of western scholars so as to create a setting in which both sets of historians would work together on the history of the collapsed East German state. This mixture had great advantages, because the easterners brought with them a considerable amount of inside knowledge. So when trying to decipher documents of the SED's Central Committee, for instance, the easterners could translate cryptic party language to western scholars. But they also had difficulty with new methodologies as they had been cut off from international discussions of social history, quantitative history, and cultural history. In terms of methodological sophistication and international awareness, the western colleagues were further advanced. A kind of dialogue therefore emerged. The discussion was not always easy, because in recent history the work is never only about scholarship, but also about identity and personal experience. But I found that quite fruitful. I have hardly ever experienced anything intellectually as challenging as these debates because they made the conditioning of judgments on contemporary history by personal life experience more obvious than during research on older periods. (Today, fifteen years after unification this cleavage has been overcome so that we

no longer hire Easterners or Westerners anymore. Instead, we just look for intellectual excellence.)

Initially we mostly focused on the repressive system but also tried to take its societal underpinning into account. Somewhat ironically, one of Jürgen Kocka's early programmatic lectures gave the impression that "Bielefeld was meeting the GDR." The structural-historical approach of the so-called Bielefeld School which had been developed in the late 1960s and the early 1970s was very fruitful in the West German discussion. But when this *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* had to confront a different political system and deal with issues like repression and mass dictatorship—not in the Nazi guise, but in a communist version—theoretical difficulties ensued. At the same time, more traditional scholars revived totalitarianism theory for the very understandable reason that historians now had to explain two repressive dictatorships on the same soil which seemed to have many structural similarities. As an alternative to the moralizing totalitarian model, the ZZF developed its own version of a *Diktaturvergleich*, a more open-ended comparison of dictatorships, because the problem with totalitarianism theory is its close association with anti-Communist politics. To more differentiating scholars, the return of totalitarianism theory seemed like a revival of the Cold War mentality, where the research results were already prejudged, whereas a neutral *Diktaturvergleich* could establish not just resemblances but also differences, avoiding the assumption that the two regimes were essentially the same. Though capable of tracing direct influences and structural similarities between the Third Reich and the GDR, an even-handed comparison of dictatorships would allow one to say e. g. that the Nazis ended up killing many more people than the communists did, at least in Germany. Making use of Martin Broszat's concept of *Historisierung*, I therefore started talking about the need for a critical historicization in order to suggest treating the GDR as being really in the past, without glossing over its negative features in retrospect. The *Enquetekommission*, the Bundestag's commission of inquiry on the former GDR, which was dominated by conservative politicians and anti-Communist scholars, tended to take a hard line, replicating the views of the victims of the communist dictatorship. In contrast, the ZZF tried to establish in the public debate an alternative both to vindictive communist-bashing and the sort of post-communist apologetics that made the GDR appear more cuddly than it really was.

To us the intellectual challenge was to develop a contemporary history of East Germany that took seriously its dictatorial character, but also dealt with more positive recollections of everyday life. We attempted to address the mixed experiences of the people in their repressive state, because we found out very quickly that for East Germans it was very difficult to dissociate their personal lives from the political system. It

seemed quite important to me to avoid what had happened in West Germany, namely a discrepancy between a dominant critical history—informing public media representation, intellectual discourse and academic research—and a subterranean apologetic memory which was handed down as private narrative of victimhood. This is my personal reading of what had happened in West Germany until the 1980s. In order not to repeat this duality, we wanted to find a more differentiated way of reconstructing the problematic East German past to make it possible for people to recognize some of their own experiences in our academic rendering. This meant interpreting the SED-system as full of contradictions rather than as a homogenous dictatorship. Hence the first set of research projects at the ZZF investigated “structures of rule and dimensions of experience” (*Herrschaftsstrukturen und Erfahrungsdimensionen*). At the beginning, we focused mostly on political repression and its social-structural effects. At the same time we also did a lot of *Historiographiegeschichte*, in order to study how historians behaved in the GDR in order to highlight the vulnerability of our own discipline. More recently, we have moved from *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* towards more cultural questions, but have tried to maintain some degree of international and political history in the Institute as well. Research on the dictatorial character of the GDR has mainly shifted to an analysis of cultural legitimacy and soft stabilizers, rather than harsh repression. We have also tried to develop a regional research focus, because one of the casualties of the unification was the *Historische Kommission* in Berlin. We recently acquired a coordinating position for Berlin and Brandenburg to work with various kinds of *Gedenkstätten* (memorial sites) in order to coordinate their activities more with academic historical scholarship. Although our research remains centered on the GDR, we have expanded our perspective to other Soviet satellites in East Central Europe, especially Czechoslovakia and Poland. We have also established that we are able to compare post-war developments between East and West Germany. In the early years that was considered politically incorrect.

Two aspects make the ZZF somewhat unique among other institutes concerned with contemporary history: First, we mainly specialize in GDR history broadly construed and in the time period after 1945. Although there is some overlap between all institutes, we try to respect the regional and chronological differentiation among centers dealing with the recent past. The reputation of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich originally rested on its work before 1945; since they have a great library and archive in this area, it would be stupid to duplicate that. In contrast, the FZH in Hamburg is more concerned with the history of the Federal Republic and transnational topics. The Hannah-Arendt Institute in Dresden also does a lot of GDR history, but it has a regional focus that is

further east, in Saxony and towards Poland and Czechoslovakia. Second, the ZZF has developed an intellectual style of its own that is the result of a special cluster of traits: a pluralism of methodological approaches; a self-reflexiveness concerning historiographical questions; a comparative approach to other dictatorships; and finally, an openness to new forms of communication, such as cooperating with H-Soz-Kult to develop the Clio Online and Zeitgeschichte Online web portals and other websites.

5. Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung, Dresden

The Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung was founded in 1993. In addition to several book series, the Institute publishes the journal *Totalitarismus und Demokratie/Totalitarianism and Democracy*; published annual reports are also available. The Institute's website is www.hait.tu-dresden.de. We interviewed Gerhard Besier, professor of totalitarianism research at the University of Dresden and the author of numerous works, including *Der Heilige Stuhl und Hitler-Deutschland: Die Faszination des Totalitären* (Munich, 2004). He has served as the Institute's director since 2003.

Gerhard Besier: The founders were able to convince the Saxon state parliament that such an institute was needed after two German dictatorships. The idea behind the Hannah-Arendt-Institut was that it should concentrate on these two dictatorships, perhaps with an emphasis on the East German dictatorship. That program has been fulfilled in different ways, depending on the priorities set by each director of the institute. The founders also had strong interests in local and regional history. Those promoting the project inside and outside of the state parliament came primarily from the *Bürgerrechtsbewegung* (the East German civil-rights movement that initiated the peaceful revolution of 1989), which is fading into the background today. I am not sure that the organizational structure of the Institute was especially well chosen. We report directly to the state of Saxony, so we are more exposed to political whims than we would be if we were a university institute. The institute researches contemporary history primarily as modern *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (history of society). We are not, however, an institute for contemporary history as such, but perform interdisciplinary work. In addition to historians, the Institute is largely composed of political scientists, philosophers, literary scholars, and sociologists.

We work on totalitarian regimes, but we also do research on how to prevent totalitarianism and on the conditions that create or stabilize freedom. We also do regional history on these topics. For example, last fall a book was published about the rebirth of the Free State of Saxony after 1989/90. We don't engage in political consulting, but we do react to

political events. In the spring of 2005, for example, we held a lecture series on the issues that had been raised by the NPD (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands). In sum, we don't view ourselves as researchers in the Ivory Tower but feel that we must react to political situations that affect society. We sponsor a wide range of events on topics ranging from the history of extremist parties in the Federal Republic to the history of anti-Semitism to public lectures on stereotypes and images of the enemy.

In our specific situation, there is, of course, the view on the part of some members of the Saxon state parliament that "this is *our* institute." This is problematic, and that is why it is sometimes necessary to explicitly distance ourselves from politics. On the other hand, we are quite ready to help parliament with political-educational work. In precarious situations, for example, in the case of the NPD's recent electoral success, I see a certain need for political education. But this must be done without creating the impression that one is close to a particular party, which we are not. The *Kuratorium* (board), *Trägerverein* (foundation), and *wissenschaftlicher Beirat* (academic advisory council) all include representatives from a spectrum of political parties. The Institute is affiliated with the university but has its own source of funding and is therefore not a university institute. The Institute's director simultaneously holds a chair in the university's history department. The director is appointed for a five-year period, and if the board does not extend his term of office, which can depend on the political constellation, then he must retreat to his professorship. I personally would prefer an institute within a university due to the specific political problems in eastern Germany. On the other hand, the founding of the Hannah-Arendt-Institut was a herculean effort that probably would not have succeeded within a university. Part of our founding history involves a public-education mission. We are expected to organize lectures that are accessible to the general public and to produce publications that average people can read.

II. SELECTED ISSUES

Definitions of Contemporary History

Axel Schildt: German research on contemporary history developed outside of the universities after 1945 because the universities and their professors were considered incapable of producing a critical appraisal of the Nazi period. For the same reason, contemporary history long carried the stigma of postwar re-education. This genesis is clearly documented for the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich but also for the Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg. Although the field of contemporary his-

tory has been recognized since the nineteenth century, it is no coincidence that there was a surge in professionalization after the Second World War — on the subject of the National Socialist regime, especially its antecedents. From this sprang the first attempts to define the field, with Hans Rothfels's definition being the most important: contemporary history as, on the one hand, the epoch of those still living and, on the other hand, the history of the period that begins with the double caesura of the Russian Revolution and the end of the First World War. There have been many attempts at a definition since Rothfels, for example by Eberhard Jäckel, who advocated extending the first aspect of the definition and dropping the second, thereby constantly moving contemporary history further into the present. If my impressions are correct, this did not succeed. Instead, contemporary history is today defined as the history of the modern era since the turn of the century or since the late 1890s. This means that contemporary history has extended its area of research backwards, and that is certainly due to the fact that the earlier distinctions between *Neueste Geschichte* (most recent history) at the universities and *Zeitgeschichte* (contemporary history) at special institutes have all but disappeared. So today we have adopted a pragmatic view as far as the time period that is studied: Contemporary history is the history of the twentieth century. In addition, contemporary history is undergoing a continual process of transformation centering around such terms as *transnationality* and *translocality*. Contemporary history was for many years the least methodologically innovative part of historical studies. Perhaps one can even formulate this as a "law": The more sources are available for study, the less interest there is in theoretical discussions. But this has certainly changed: The debates that began long ago in regard to other epochs have meanwhile reached contemporary history as a whole.

Konrad Jarausch: Classic *Zeitgeschichte* is the older contemporary history up until 1945, including the end of the First World War, the revolution, the Weimar Republic, and the Third Reich, which were considered to be *the* contemporary history until the 1970s. In the later years of the Federal Republic, a kind of second contemporary history, a postwar history, began to emerge, which is now called in German *die neuere Zeitgeschichte*. That expansion of scope got a great push with the collapse of communism and German unification. With the opening of the East German archives, contemporary history was able to extend its research from the postwar period into the 1980s and the 1990s. Just now emerging is a third, most recent segment whose temporal boundaries are still in doubt. Because of the fall of Communism, Hans Peter Schwartz asserts that it began in 1990. But I would contend that it already started in 1973/1979 with the oil shocks and the shift towards a postindustrial society, the full impact of which remained somewhat hidden in the German context by

division and reunification. It has to do with the origins of the globalization problems of today. So there seem to me to be three distinctive periods in contemporary history, dominated by three different sets of issues: The first set of problems has to do with World War One, the failure of democracy, the Third Reich, and the Holocaust, covering 1917 to 1945. The second group of concerns involves the reemergence of Europe out of the "rupture of civilization" and the process which I call in a forthcoming book the "re-civilizing of the Germans." Overshadowed by the Cold War, it extends in some aspects into the early 1990s. The third and most recent segment that starts in 1973/1979 has to do with globalization, postmodernity, and postindustrial society.

The Question of Audience

Jan Philipp Reemtsma: When I founded the institute, I had the notion that knowledge could function according to a sender-receiver model. You find out something, you put it into more or less comprehensible language, and you tell it to someone, who then knows more and can act more competently. I now think that that is a hopelessly naïve description of the process. In fact, the work of every academic institute is primarily directed at specialists in the field. But that knowledge somehow trickles down and lands somewhere, in school textbooks for instance. In other words, you influence in an indirect manner the socially conditioned ways of speaking about certain problems. If you are lucky, you change them a little bit. Indeed, it can be said that the subject "crimes of the Wehrmacht" will never again be discussed in the same way that it was before 1995. We have achieved that. One should not imagine wanting more. Behind all this there is the conviction that societies that reflect on themselves become more civilized just through this simple act of self-reflexion. This is done not by societies as a whole, of course, but by delegation. The important question is: Is there a social climate where the majority of the people say: "It's good that it's that way, that there are such people. Yes, we find that interesting and sometimes we even feel like listening to them."

Horst Möller: The Institute has two kinds of public. The first is comprised exclusively of specialists, above all those who use the library and archive. But the Institute has also always thought about reaching a broader audience. For this purpose a book series was founded in the 1960s: the *dtv-Weltgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (World History of the Twentieth Century), edited by Martin Broszat and Helmut Heiber, with fairly high print runs, even though these were all scholarly books. In the 1980s the Institute started publishing another series: *Deutsche Geschichte der Neuesten Zeit* (German History of the Recent Past), planned to be thirty volumes, only twenty-nine of which were published. These are books for

the general public. The top print runs have reached between 30,000 and 50,000 copies.

Konrad Jarausch: At the beginning the public, such as journalists, citizens and other scholars, simply came to us. We could announce almost any theme for a lecture or conference, and people would flock in. No matter what GDR topic we would propose, the lecture room would be crammed and we would have some very emotional discussions. Some people defended the humane aspirations of the system; others denounced its inhumane character; and still others tried to reconcile such these contradictions. And we saw our role as helping the public process of sorting out the historic legacy of the GDR, which was still up for grabs in the media, in politics and in personal judgments. This direct interest has faded in the last five years, because half a generation after the end of the SED-state most people have gotten on with their lives, the new challenges of the unification crisis tend to overshadow earlier suffering, and the collapse of the GDR has created a strange kind of nostalgia for a lost world. But I think the media interest in contemporary history has increased with the deepening Holocaust sensibility. During the year 2005 we just had a real run with the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Also the multiple aftereffects of the SED-dictatorship will still be felt for a long time, triggering new aesthetic representations and political discussions.

***Zeitgeschichte* and Politics**

Horst Möller: What responsibility does academic research on contemporary history have to the larger society? On the one hand, public discussions about controversial topics in contemporary history are a welcome phenomenon because they show that the public is interested in history. On the other hand, there is also a negative aspect, because the public can easily get the feeling that if they see a television broadcast or series on a subject, then they know “the history.” Historians are of a different opinion. We believe that it is not possible to achieve historical understanding with two sentences from an interview with a contemporary eyewitness. This means, however, that academic historians come under pressure: “If television does this, why don’t you? And if you criticize it, then do it better!” But, of course, when a well-known television figure like Guido Knopp airs a program with one-and-a-half-million viewers, and afterwards they say, “Here is the companion book to the program,” then that provides a kind of advertising with which academic publications cannot compete. So we find ourselves in a bit of a bind because the public and the politicians say that academia has an obligation here. In this regard, institutes like ours must constantly battle for their independence and make clear that the work that they do is time-consuming, has only a limited

audience, but is nevertheless indispensable. The public marketing of contemporary history, when really successful, rests on a division of labor. Journalists carry out this task, but in so doing, they use the publications of historians; and these are produced according to scholarly standards.

Gerhard Besier: Politicians always pay attention to research on contemporary history, and instances of interference can arise when research, on political parties for instance, turns up things that are perceived as a disturbance. Contemporary history also cannot be easily separated from journalism. From the outside, the Hannah-Arendt-Institut is often regarded as a great authority. If an institute says something, then it must carry great weight. That is not at all the case, however, except perhaps in historians' dreams. Even when books result from our work, the moment of public attention is quite short.

Axel Schildt: One of the central questions is how we should present the results of research in contemporary history to the public, especially as regards the competition with contemporary history in the media, which has become an independent area of activity over the past decade. Here we face the problem of making sure, on the one hand, not to trivialize our research findings for the sake of public attention, and, on the other, not to sit off somewhere in splendid isolation bemoaning the shallowness of the commercial media. Navigating between these two extremes is the main challenge for institutes like ours. Many public debates about contemporary history are really about something else entirely, big ethical-political questions such as: What is evil? How is evil coded—whether it is the Holocaust or Stalinism or another historical phenomenon? Such debates always have a political aspect related to the pursuit of current interests. This, of course, calls on contemporary history as a discipline that can historicize certain debates and can thereby add a deeper dimension to them.

Jan Philipp Reemtsma: One of the key questions is: To which academic discipline do we assign the creation of meaning (*Sinnstiftung*)? Up until the eighteenth century this task was performed by theology, then by philosophy, especially in the form of the philosophy of history. And the academic field of history has inherited quite a lot from this, even where it has completely jettisoned any remnant of the philosophy of history. When a Wehler or a Mommsen comments on political matters as a historian, this always has a lingering philosophical flavor, and that leads to interesting paradoxes. For history cannot take on this role of a creator of meaning, because that would spell a return to philosophical constructions of meaning, and the field of history avoids that for good reason. Historians can say only how things were and point out larger contexts that the layperson might miss. But so much more is expected of them: One can sense this even with regard to the history programs on television produced by the much-reviled Guido Knopp. Why are these programs so

popular? Of course, they are popular in part because it is a politically correct way of watching war movies. But it is not only that. The programs are also popular because people watch them and think: "Perhaps some secret will be revealed to us that will tell us why all of this happened." What really happened in this century? This is a very different question at the end of the twentieth century than it was at the end of the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century was in many ways colorful and remarkable, but it was not mysterious. At the end of the twentieth century, people faced the question: "What happened here?" And that is why the question for history has been much more urgent. Historical writing cannot do anything except narrate the events of the past. It cannot create meaning. But then who should perform this task? Literature, film? This situation does indeed create a special position for contemporary history, albeit a precarious, aporetic, unresolvable one. Historians have to handle this by making it clear that it is possible to give interpretations, by insisting that interpretations are different from the creation of meaning, and by deconstructing certain conventional questions with the help of theory.

Konrad Jarausch: The close relationship of *Zeitgeschichte* to politics is what makes it exciting, but it is also what creates special pitfalls for historians. During the founding of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich, it was not clear whether this new institute should be primarily dedicated to research or to political education, a concept that later developed into the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. The early memoranda always mention this as a double task. The assumption, of course, was that scholarship that is vigorously pursued and tries to be objective will contribute to civic education and reinforce a budding democracy. That premise is, however, not unproblematic. On the one hand, the overriding ethical commitment of a historian has to be to do sound research. On the other hand, contemporary historians also have to defend the preconditions for their own research, and that requires taking a stand on political controversies. Christoph Klessman, the just retired co-director, therefore phrased the central task of contemporary history as "wissenschaftliche Aufklärung"—an academically-based enlightenment about the recent past that is just turning from the lived present into something called history. Of course, this mysterious transformation involves contestations to sort out what images about the past will survive and how certain developments will be interpreted in the future. Contemporary historians need to be aware of this process of sifting so that they can play a conscious role in it and thereby meet their ethical obligations. Their predicament consists of the need to reconcile their commitment to values such as truthfulness with the defense of a set of political rights that make their own inquiry possible in the first place. Scholarship that tries to be objective is not possible in a dictatorial setting; but neither is free inquiry

likely if it lets itself be instrumentalized for party-political purposes. Because all contemporary historians have personal political predilections, they need to be self-reflexive about the potential influence of such prejudices. Their work will make a lasting contribution only if they do not act unselfconsciously in this complicated arena, but also reflect what they are doing.

International Aspects

Horst Möller: International perspectives were previously not at the center of the institute's work. Before 1989 the Institute was one-of-a-kind and there was a certain self-satisfaction in knowing that in the field of historical research on National Socialism we are the best, and everyone comes to us. When I returned to the Institute as director in 1992, I made it a programmatic point that German contemporary history must be internationalized, in terms of both subjects and methods. German contemporary history remains central for us, but the important comparative questions are always found in international interconnections and comparisons. For example: Why did French democracy last until 1940, while German democracy collapsed in 1933? The question *why* always becomes a different question if one proceeds comparatively instead of looking at a single national case.

Axel Schildt: I think that contemporary history will continue to be shaped primarily by the nation. Aspects that are comparative, that seek to trace the history of influences and connections, that are international, are all important ways of enriching our understanding of our own national history, of course. But I do not think that it is possible to entirely replace national history with a kind of European or even global history. For our institute in particular, two aspects are essential: first, to differentiate the national in light of local and regional narratives that make it possible to understand the big master narratives of national history. The watchword *translocality* is important for our institute: that is, using our city as a starting point for gaining insights into European and global history by way of local history. Second, we try to link the local with the global by stressing Hamburg's position as a city of international trade and an international harbor. A project about the Chinese migration to Hamburg and a new project about Hamburg's coffee trade, especially with Latin American countries, may serve as examples for this commitment. In cooperation with the GHI, we are also building an international network to explore, edit and analyze foreign consulate reports from German cities during the so called Third Reich, hoping to thus highlight the political and social changes from an international perspective.

Konrad Jarausch: The key challenge for the ZZf is the debate about the creation of a European memory culture that provides a critical rather

than merely affirmative commentary on the continuing process at integration. One priority is therefore helping East-Central European historians with their own establishment of institutions of contemporary history in order to reinforce their new democratic public sphere. In Romania for instance, this was a highly contested project. Another related task is the further Europeanization of contemporary history, breaking the consideration of the recent past out of the national confines and lifting it into a broader interactive framework. We are heavily involved in the creation of a network of institutes for contemporary history in Europe and trying to make it work intellectually through finding common themes. Furthermore, in Berlin and Brandenburg we are located at the point where the two European memory cultures collide: As the competing memorials show, the Western concern with the lessons of the Holocaust meets the Eastern preoccupation with the suffering induced by Communism. Therefore we see it as our charge to work on these issues and facilitate communication between these two memory cultures. This is not just something that can be proclaimed abstractly in manifestos, but something that has to be done concretely through academic conferences and bringing in visiting scholars.

Gerhard Besier: We study dictatorships by means of comparisons between countries but also between regions, for example between Upper Silesia and Saxony. We have a very strong emphasis on East Central Europe. We have established a branch in Poland and one in the Czech Republic because we are convinced that only a continuous exchange of both teachers and students can achieve something. In this way we are trying to set up a real network of academic exchange in this three-country triangle. Of course, we also work with colleagues in Great Britain, France, and the United States. Overall, our research is about the European context and about the construction of a European consciousness. It is certainly the case that the impulses for writing works of contemporary history and political science come primarily from western countries. We take up these impulses and try to disseminate them. For example, we have a publication series in which research results from our Institute's symposia appear in the Polish language so that our colleagues in Poland can read about, say, French research on right-wing extremism. Thus we also see ourselves as a "transformation belt" conveying the latest research in various fields between East and West.

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