

THE LIGHTS ARE GOING OUT ALL OVER EUROPE

Theater performance and roundtable discussion at the GHI, February 24 and 25, 2006. Co-sponsored by the Friends of the German Historical Institute, the German University Alliance, New York (University of Munich and the Free University of Berlin), the BMW Center for German and European Studies, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, and the German Information Center, German Embassy, Washington, DC. Conveners: Roger Chickering (Georgetown University) and Christof Mauch (GHI).

Participants: Actors and technical staff of the Theater Sündenfall directed by Nikolaus Frei and Björn Potulski; Katrin Sieg (Georgetown University).

Putting war on the stage is a formidable theatrical challenge. Rising to this challenge, a group of young Munich actors has brought the July crisis of 1914 to the stage. The troupe Theater Sündenfall describes its documentary drama “The Lights are Going Out All Over Europe” as a *danse macabre* that seeks to illuminate the origins of the First World War. The play had its U.S. premiere at the German Historical Institute in Washington in February 2006.

Why, to paraphrase the famous observations of British Foreign Minister Edward Grey, did the lights go out in Europe? By way of an answer, Theater Sündenfall presented a collage of excerpts from a broad range of primary sources. Participants in the events of the summer of 1914, ranging from statesmen and generals to ordinary soldiers, take turns speaking for themselves in their native tongues—Grey in English, for example, Kaiser Wilhelm in German, Foreign Minister Sergei Sasanov in Russian. As is now common practice in many opera houses, translations were provided in supertitles. The one not strictly historical figure in the play was the allegorical figure of Death, who provided a commentary on the events of the summer of 1914 as they unfolded onstage and thereby cast a spotlight on the absurdity of national ambitions and the perversity of war.

Following the performance, historian Roger Chickering and literary scholar Katrin Sieg discussed “The Lights are Going Out All Over Europe” as a work of history and a work of theatrical art. Chickering pointed out that the play did an excellent job in bringing one of the central questions of European history to the stage—the question of who, or what, started World War I. The frivolity, the incompetence, and the nonchalance of the major protagonists was made manifest and juxtaposed with the responses of common soldiers to the events engulfing

them. For Chickering, the performance was “a study in human weakness.” Sieg set “The Lights are Going Out All Over Europe” within the tradition of documentary theater. Especially popular during the 1960s, this mode of drama typically gave pride of place to the experience of the ordinary person rather than to the doings of “great men.” The “phenomenon of transnational complicity” dramatized in the play and its “ironicization” of Europe’s leaders speak very much to the present moment, Sieg observed. World War I might for that reason provide better material for theater, she went on to suggest, than World War II.

The open discussion that followed centered on the question of why a group of young German actors had decided to take up the subject of the outbreak of World War I. The debacle of 1914 also raised the question of how—or whether—wars can be prevented. “The Lights are Going Out All Over Europe” played to two capacity audiences at the GHI, and the reviews in the local press were very positive.

Christof Mauch