

## CONTROLLING THE STREETS OF NAZI GERMANY MID-ATLANTIC GERMAN HISTORY SEMINAR

Seminar, at the GHI, April 29, 2006. Conveners: Marion Deshmukh (George Mason University) and Christof Mauch (GHI). Speaker: Nathan Stoltzfus (Florida State University).

Public protests by ordinary Germans during the Nazi period were the topic of a work-in-progress discussion by Nathan Stoltzfus at the spring meeting of the Mid-Atlantic German History Seminar. Rare though such protests were, they represent aggregately a specific type of behavior that could variegate understandings of opposition behaviors and regime responses to them. Well-established are the categories of resistance (*Widerstand*), noncompliance (*Verweigerung*), bystander passivity (*Zuschauern*), fellow-travelling (*Mitläufer*), collaboration (*Mitarbeit*), and perpetration (*Täter/in*). Currently, there are about as many definitions of the word protest as there are historians using the term to describe this or that action in Nazi Germany. Stoltzfus's study defines protest in specific terms, surveys civilian actions that apply, and looks for characteristics common to them all. How did the regime respond to these across time, through the various periods of the Nazi years?

Much of the discussion focused on the question of why ordinary Germans protested, and ways of determining their motivations. Why did they express opposition in the form of public protest? Documentation on this is just as scarce as opportunities for oral history at this point. Some participants in the discussion suggested examining the milieus of those who engaged in this rare form of expressing opposition, regionally and ideologically. What were the deep-seated beliefs their communities held that enabled them to put up some expression of opposition not just to the regime, but to general social silence and conformity as well? Examples of dominant forces in this sense include Catholicism and class consciousness formed by Communism and Socialism. Whether distinct Communist/Socialist milieus existed remains an open question, although the Ruhr area and some Berlin neighborhoods constitute the most likely areas for study. Others suggested examining social-cultural histories of local areas where public group protests occurred as a way of describing motivations. Especially interesting would be studies of the final phase of the war, particularly as a context for understanding the women's protest in Witten of October 1943. What were local conditions and attitudes at this time, as a way of understanding local behavior? Was loyalty to the regime still common by the end phase of the war, or did concerns for survival, for example, dominate?

In some cases of public protest the dictatorship made some compromises, at least on a single policy and to the very limited, local extent to which the policy affected those protesting and their families. This was due to the National Socialist concern for popular morale and mass-movement support of ordinary Germans. The regime acted tactically within a broader strategy of achieving its most important goals to the maximum extent. The Witten women protesters caused the state to meet them on their own terms, for example, on the matter of wartime urban evacuations due to Allied air attacks. Should this response best be seen as a concession by the regime, or merely as a way of resolving a conflict that strengthened the regime's authority?

Finally, it was suggested that the behavior of ordinary Germans who expressed limited opposition in the form of public protest is best understood by examining experience at the local level. The study of particular local conditions and attitudes, and how they changed over time, would shed light on collective behavior and regime responses. What role if any did various levels of authority play in this? It is important to explore the responses at the Gauleiter level to these rare protests, and how they might have differed from authorities at other levels. The issue of the politicization of space and the propaganda uses of streets is an important context for these local histories. So too is the relative lack of popular participation in German politics until the 1970s.

*Nathan Stoltzfus*