

CONFERENCE REPORTS

HISTORIES OF THE AFTERMATH: THE EUROPEAN “POSTWAR” IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Conference at the University of California, San Diego, February 16–17, 2007. Jointly organized by the GHI, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), the Center for German and European Studies of the University of California at Berkeley, the University of California Humanities Research Institute, as well as the Humanities Center and the Department of History of the University of California at San Diego. Conveners: Frank Biess (University of California, San Diego), Robert Moeller (University of California, Irvine), Dirk Schumann (GHI).

Participants: Elazar Barkan (Columbia University), Ruth Ben-Ghiat (New York University), Paul Betts (University of Sussex), Frank Biess (University of California, San Diego), Jane Caplan (Oxford University), William Chandler (University of California, San Diego), Choi Chatterjee (California State University, Los Angeles), John Connelly (University of California, Berkeley), Christian Delage (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris), Susan Derwin (University of California, Santa Barbara), Robert Edelman (University of California, San Diego), Geoff Eley (University of Michigan), Fatima El-Tayeb (University of California, San Diego), Kai Evers (University of California, Irvine), Sarah Farmer (University of California, Irvine), Heide Fehrenbach (Northern Illinois), Peter Gourevitch (University of California, San Diego), Jan Gross (Princeton University), Michael Hayse (Stockton College), Deborah Hertz (University of California, San Diego), Lisa Kirschenbaum (West Chester University), Anna Krylova (Duke University), Pieter Lagrou (Université de Bruxelles), Martha Lampland (University of California, San Diego), Katherine Lebow (University of Virginia), Charles Maier (Harvard University), Gisela Mettele (GHI), Robert Moeller (University of California, Irvine), Samuel Moyn (Columbia University), Norman Naimark (Stanford University), Klaus Naumann (Hamburg Institute for Social Research), Philip Nord (Princeton University), Patrick Patterson (University of California, San Diego), Paul Pickowicz (University of California, San Diego), Pamela Radcliff (University of California, San Diego), Sonya Rose (University of Michigan), Mikhail Tsympkin (Naval Postgraduate School), Dorothee Wierling (University of Hamburg), Jonathan Wiesen (Southern Illinois University), Lisa Yoneyama (University of California, San Diego), Denise Youngblood (University of Vermont).

The purpose of the conference was to search for a framework of analysis that can adequately capture the abiding aftermath and legacy of the Second World War in Europe. Until 1989/91, narratives of the post-World War II period in Europe emphasized that 1945 marked a major rupture in European history. The year 1945 was understood as the beginning of a future that would head either in a liberal democratic or communist direction. The story of the post-Second World War period was the story of the world the Cold War made. The experiences of Europeans were eclipsed by the confrontation of the superpowers and the division of Europe between East and West.

The end of the Cold War, however, has enabled us to study postwar European societies from a different perspective that centers on the concept of the “postwar,” emphasizing not only what divided but what united Europeans. From this perspective, European history after 1945 is not only exclusively or even primarily refracted through the prism of the Cold War. The purpose of this conference was to probe the usefulness of this decidedly different, novel approach to the postwar European experience. Starting from the working hypothesis that postwar European history should not be told as a story of the parallel processes of integration into competing models of liberal-democratic Americanized consumer society in the West and a Stalinist dictatorship in the East, the approach to the “postwar” emphasizes that understanding the divergent wartime experiences of European societies is essential for understanding post-1945 developments. This approach disrupts the notion of 1945 as a complete hiatus that severed the two halves of the “Age of Extremes” (Eric Hobsbawm) and instead charts the various continuities from war to postwar.

Paper presenters addressed the extent to which it is possible to identify a common post-Second World War experience that unified Europeans and the ways in which different national experiences dramatically diverged. Papers were pre-circulated, allowing participants to come to La Jolla with a clear idea of what we would discuss, and presenters were allowed only five minutes to highlight key theses. Discussions were framed by commentators—two for each session—who were allowed about fifteen minutes each. This meant that there was ample time for discussion at each session. The leavening of historians, political scientists, sociologists, and literary theorists also allowed for very interesting discussions of disciplinary and methodological differences and points of intersection.

In an opening panel, papers raised the question of when the postwar ended, and presentations suggested that the answer was quite different for Germans in East and West, Poles, and the French. No more uniform were the public and private memories of the war, addressed in the second panel, and memories ranged from those of the “Great Patriotic War” in

the Soviet Union to a Christian discourse of suffering, embodied in commemorative sites in West Germany. Memories were also anything but constant, and a paper that focused on the German attempt to murder all European Jews revealed the ways in which conceptions of the concentration camp system have shifted over time. The postwar also began at home, as the third panel revealed, and traces of the aftermath could be located in East and West German etiquette books and the attitudes toward race embodied in practices of family reconstitution and adoption. "Histories of the Aftermath" were also mass-mediated at the movies, the subject of a fourth panel that offered Soviet, West German, and Italian perspectives.

The conference's second day began with a review of post-1945 military cultures in West Germany and the Soviet Union and a consideration of the ways in which international agreements on the conduct of armed conflict represented another embodiment of memories of partisan warfare in the Second World War. In a panel that focused on "Nation and Citizenship," presenters suggested the ways in which the legacy of the war intersected with the legacies of colonialism and decolonization in redefinitions of who was included in the nation in Great Britain. A second paper suggested how the language of reconstruction after the war defined productivist conceptions of citizenship in socialist states. The panel's final paper argued that the histories of a shared European experience in the Second World War have tended to eclipse, if not fully erase, the history of decolonization and the movements of large populations of people of color into Europe after 1945.

In a final panel, roundtable participants with expertise in global history and Asian studies offered perspectives from the "Outside," suggesting the very different "aftermaths" of the war in the Pacific, and insisting on the need to bring together the sometimes divergent histories of decolonization and post-World War II recovery and reconstruction.

Robert Moeller