

READING HAMBURG: ANGLO-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

Conference at the Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg (FZH), September 6–8, 2007. Co-organized by the GHI and the FZH. Conveners: Axel Schildt (FZH), Christoph Strupp (DGIA-Research Fellow, FZH), Dorothee Wierling (FZH).

Participants: Katherine B. Aaslestad (West Virginia University), Lars Amenda (FZH), Frank Bajohr (FZH), Julia Bruggemann (DePauw University), Charles Closmann (University of North Florida), Elisabeth von Dücker (Museum der Arbeit, Hamburg), Geoffrey Giles (University of Florida), Frank Hatje (University of Hamburg), Rainer Hering (Landesarchiv Schleswig-Holstein, Schleswig), Jennifer Jenkins (University of Toronto), Carolyn H. Kay (Trent University), Eckart Krause (University of Hamburg), Ann C. Le Bar (Eastern Washington University), Emily Levine (Stanford University), Mary Lindemann (University of Miami), Jürgen Martschukat (University of Erfurt), Anthony McElligott (University of Limerick), Julia Sneeringer (Queens College, New York), Robert P. Stephens (Virginia Polytechnic Institute), Maiken Umbach (University of Manchester), Andrew Wackerfuss (Georgetown University), Klaus Weinbauer (University of Bielefeld / University of Lüneburg), Clayton Whisnant (Wofford College), Frank Zelko (University of Vermont), Tamara Zwick (University of South Florida).

Few German cities have received as much attention from Anglo-American historians as Hamburg. The Directory of History Dissertations of the American Historical Association alone lists eighteen entries for Hamburg, considerably more than for Munich, Frankfurt, Cologne, or Leipzig. Hamburg, as one of the biggest cities in Germany, a commercial hub, and a city with a long-standing tradition as a center of culture and the media, certainly has a lot to offer to historians. The strong international interest in Hamburg was reason enough for the Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg, in collaboration with the GHI, to organize a conference on the history of Hamburg as reflected in Anglo-American research of the last two decades. It was the main purpose of the conference to draw the balance of existing projects, many of which have already led to publications, but also to stimulate future research, to expand the existing network of international "Hamburg historians," and to create new links to German colleagues. The conference took place onsite and opened with a tour of Hamburg's historic Town Hall and an official reception of the participants by the Hamburg Senate, represented by State Secretary Roland Salchow of the Department of Science and Research.

Even though no topics or methodological approaches had been excluded deliberately, many of the presentations at the conference focused on cultural history—in line with international trends in current historical research in general. This was particularly true for the first day that featured papers on a variety of aspects of the city's civic culture from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century. The first two sections dealt with different aspects of *Bürgerkultur* in the decades around 1800. Mary Lindemann focused on true crime narratives in eighteenth-century Hamburg. By using the crimes of Maria Wächtler, who was accused of matricide, Charlotte Guyard, who committed perjury, and Daniel Nachtigal, who was a blackmailer, she shed light on the changing relationship between real-life crimes and their complex literary afterlife, which was in turn a result of broader changes in the economic and cultural situation of Hamburg.

Ann C. Le Bar refuted the long-standing myth of Hamburg citizens being disinterested in music by focusing on the process of music-making and its function in domestic life instead of the activities of great composers. While it is true that a vibrant tradition of church music and opera had come to an end in the early eighteenth century, particularly in the middle classes, music lived on behind closed doors. Rich collections of vocal music with sacred and secular songs side by side appeared in print throughout the entire eighteenth century and underlined the importance of amateur domestic singing as a social event and an integral part of Hamburg's civic culture.

Katherine Aaslestad presented her research on the Hanseatic ideal of republicanism and the changes it underwent between 1780 and 1815. In the late eighteenth century, a flourishing popular press had helped codify a common vocabulary of republican identity with strong self-congratulatory notions and introduced it to a constantly growing audience. Under the influence of the Enlightenment in Northern Germany, the political upheavals of the French Revolution, and the political, economic, and military crises of the Napoleonic era, Hamburg's collective identity went through a period of transformation. Patriotism became distinctly militaristic, and the traditional civic virtue of serving the common good waned in favor of a *laissez-faire* attitude.

Tamara Zwick focused on aspects of kinship and gender in the Hamburg middle classes of the early nineteenth century. She demonstrated the important social function of the open tables and salons that were organized by women of influential families from the mercantile elite such as Johanna Sieveking. They were open to the public, and it was even possible to be a member by correspondence. In the meetings of these open tables and salons, the public and the private sphere interconnected in various ways.

The discussion of civic culture and the role of Hamburg's citizen elite continued with presentations on art and architecture in the decades around 1900. Jennifer Jenkins focused on the cultural consequences of the major economic and political transformations the city underwent during the Kaiserreich. She identified a form of "public culture" that was characterized by its modernist attitude, unique social depth, and an expansion of public life in the form of new associations and institutions. It was personified by Alfred Lichtwark, the first director of the Hamburg *Kunsthalle* and proponent of an aesthetic education for broader social strata.

However, Lichtwark's "pioneering spirit" and his strong support for French and German impressionistic art met with resistance in the city, as Carolyn Kay showed in her paper. Even though generous donations from members of the local elite enabled him to build a first-class art collection for the *Kunsthalle*, the realistic, distinctly "unheroic" portrait of Mayor Carl Petersen he had commissioned from Max Liebermann led to a major scandal in 1892. The conflict illustrated different artistic tastes and attitudes within the Hamburg bourgeoisie, and it also shed light on the general discrepancies between contemporary perceptions of modern art and current interpretations.

In her presentation on Hamburg's "built environment" around the turn of the century, Maiken Umbach highlighted the tension between the strong particularistic tendencies of the "Free and Hanseatic City" of Hamburg and the growing importance of its national role in the Kaiserreich. This tension was not only visible in the style of major new buildings that were finished between the 1880s and the 1900s: It also influenced Hamburg's stance toward German colonialism, which in its strong orientation toward certain commercial aspects—primarily banking interests and ship-building—was distinctly different from that of other German regions.

The sections on elite culture were rounded out with a presentation by Emily Levine on the art historian Erwin Panofsky's tenure at the new University of Hamburg. Panofsky went to Hamburg as a *Privatdozent* in 1921, became a full professor in 1926, and was driven into exile in 1933. In the 1920s, with financial support from the Warburg family, Hamburg became the birthplace of modern art history and the iconological method. Panofsky stood at the center of the academically highly respected "Hamburg School," but under difficult economic and political circumstances, the role of a professor and of the university as a whole changed. Levine used Panofsky's satire "Socrates in Hamburg," a short play performed at a "Winterfestival" and published in 1931, to reflect upon the complex relationship between urban setting, economic and intellectual life, and the multilayered role of civic patronage in Hamburg.

All presentations on Hamburg's history from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century emphasized the particularly civic character of its culture and the close relationship between culture and the bourgeois elite. However, from 1914 on, the political and economic crises seriously undermined the position of the bourgeoisie in Germany in general. It was therefore probably no coincidence that in the part of the conference that focused on contemporary history, the perspective widened to include additional social groups and different topics.

Anthony McElligott looked back on his research on the workers' movement and the rise of Nazism in Altona. By focusing less on organized workers and political parties and more on local networks, and by broadening the time frame to include the prehistory of the revolution of 1918 and the first years of the Nazi regime after 1933, he was able to open new paths beyond traditional German narratives of Weimar *Arbeitergeschichte*. In his presentation, he also shed light on the complex interaction of national politics with politics and policies on the local level.

Neighborhood relations and local politics also played an important part in Andrew Wackerfuss's research on the mental universe of the "stormtrooper family" of the SA in Hamburg. In his interpretation, the paramilitary organization of the NSDAP attracted new members in the city less because of its right-wing ideology than due to personal reasons. Existing personal networks facilitated the joining of the SA. The SA detachments had deep roots in the neighborhoods. Membership shaped the political attitude, religious beliefs, and even the sexual identity of young men. World War I and the crises of the early 1920s had put a strain on traditional forms of the family. In the SA, comrades could become *Ersatz* families, and SA dormitories literally replaced home for many young men without a family of their own. However, for those with wives and children, the SA "family" rivaled their real family for time and attention, and the communal living arrangements were in conflict with the self-image of SA men as "respectable citizens."

Despite the homosexual overtones of the movement and the *Männerbund* atmosphere at the SA Wackerfuss described in his paper, the NSDAP, of course, was strictly opposed to homosexuality, and after 1933, their exclusionary policies also targeted gay men. However, neither the definition of what constituted a homosexual nor the legal consequences of being accused of homosexual acts were consistent. Geoffrey Giles used the cases of the economist Karl August Fischer, the historian Otto Westphal, and the military historian and *Wehrwissenschaftler* Alfred Schüz—all three strong supporters of the Nazification of the University of Hamburg and, in the mid-1930s, all three accused of homosexual behavior—to shed light on the considerable variations in the legal proceedings and the university's reaction to the cases.

After 1945, the tightened Section 175 of the German Penal Code remained in effect for another twenty-five years. However, Clayton Whisnant, in his paper on the Hamburg gay scene after World War II, painted a complex picture of tolerance and repression. He identified two tensions that run counter to established political and social narratives of a linear development from persecution to liberation and the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1969, and from the conformist 1950s to the rebellious 1960s. Based on interviews with contemporaries and Hamburg court cases, he described the late 1940s and early 1950s as a period that many gay men experienced as being relatively tolerant, in which a lively gay publishing industry existed in the city, and in which even other police departments considered Hamburg's policies to be rather lenient. From the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, the pressure on the gay scene increased. Heightened police and *Jugendschutz* activities created an atmosphere of renewed repression, even though at the same time those voices that would ultimately contribute to the reform of Section 175 started to gain ground.

One of the key attractions for tourists in Hamburg still today is the famous "Reeperbahn," the nightlife district in St. Pauli, home to a variety of bars, brothels, and porn-shops, but also cabaret and music clubs. The city had to deal with the issue of prostitution as early as the nineteenth century, when brothels existed in many neighborhoods. Julia Bruggemann described how the authorities introduced a system of strict regulation that made women available to men but kept them under close supervision to protect public order and the health of the customers. From the 1870s to World War I, the shortcomings and contradictions of the official policy led to intense public debates in which Christian groups, leaders of the Social Democratic Party, and feminist women's organizations played key roles.

While prostitution always had had economic benefits, only in the 1950s did Hamburg begin to actually embrace the rougher sides of its image and actively market the Reeperbahn, as Julia Sneeringer showed in her paper on the "assembly line of joys." After the war, tourism played an important role for the West German economic recovery, and it helped reestablish Germany's image as being open and tolerant. The red light district, the bars, and the flourishing music scene in St. Pauli made Hamburg *the* place to go for adult entertainment, and contemporary tourism guides and official brochures openly advertised it as such. Sneeringer pointed out that Hamburg became a forerunner of changes in postwar West Germany that ranged from leisure to new attitudes about sexuality to youth culture in general.

An unwanted side effect of the new leisure culture was the use of drugs in Hamburg in the 1960s and 1970s, which Robert Stephens treated

in his paper from a transnational perspective. He used case files of drug users to show how goods, people, and institutions in this underground economy were interwoven on local, national, and global levels. He further shed light on the tension between the public and political perception of drug use as a social or a police problem.

The conference closed with a panel on environmental history. Charles Closmann followed the debates and policy initiatives around Hamburg's water supply system from the late nineteenth century to the 1980s. He showed how originally rather narrow debates on making safe and good-tasting drinking water available expanded into broader discussions of the environmental consequences of water use after World War II. The devastating cholera epidemic of 1892 in Hamburg led to reforms that were to ensure that contaminated water from the Elbe no longer entered the city's water supply system. Concepts and measures that were developed until 1945 continued to influence the city's water policy until the mid-1970s, even though the growth of Hamburg and the expansion of its industry and harbor economy after the war posed new challenges to its water management.

Finally, Frank Zelko presented a paper on Hamburg as a center of environmental activism in the 1970s and early 1980s. The unmitigated expansion of the Hamburg harbor after 1945 and the industrial areas around it had serious consequences for the environment, in particular the water quality of the Elbe. Since the local authorities proved ineffective in ameliorating the problem of water pollution, a grassroots movement of environmental activists from diverse social and educational backgrounds sprang up. It gained national prominence and achieved successes with the help of spectacular public actions. It became the nucleus of the German branch of Greenpeace, still headquartered in Hamburg.

The presentations at the conference and the lively discussions in the panels made it clear that the history of Hamburg has been an attractive subject of study for Anglo-American historians for a variety of reasons. Individual case-studies did not necessarily aim to portray historical developments in Hamburg as unique. Focusing on the "Free and Hanseatic City," as Hamburg is officially called—an independent political entity for centuries, and today one of the sixteen states of the Federal Republic—enabled new perspectives on broader historical trends and offered a route of escape from the dominance of Prussia in international German historiography. As was to be expected in light of general trends in historical research, methodologically, many papers focused on culture and "counter-culture," forms of cultural representation, and historical discourse. The studies on Hamburg's literature, music, art, architecture, and education reflected the distinctively civic and mercantile character of the city's social and political elite, however.

Other features of the city—for example, Hamburg’s “international” character as a port city and point of transit for people and goods from all over the world—have generated less interest abroad in recent years. While the conference did not identify a particularly “foreign” image of the history of Hamburg, several participants pointed out that their “alien” view may have been beneficial in practical ways. It fostered a “fresh look” uninhibited by existing local master narratives and self-perceptions. With politically and socially sensitive topics, it was often easier to stay clear of local conflicts and to get access to a variety of sources.

Bringing together seventeen British and North American experts on the history of Hamburg for an assessment of their projects proved to be a stimulating intellectual experience. The publication of a conference volume is not intended, but three of the presentations on Hamburg’s contemporary history have appeared in the FZH-Bulletin “Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg 2007,” published in April 2008.

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