Conference Reports

Eighth West Coast Germanists' Workshop: German History at the Crossroads? New Narratives, Perspectives, and Approaches

Workshop at the University of Colorado Boulder, March 6-7, 2026. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington Pacific Office and the History Department at the University of Colorado Boulder. Conveners: David Ciarlo (University of Colorado Boulder), Thomas Pegelow Kaplan (University of Colorado Boulder), Isabel Richter (GHI Washington | Pacific Office, Berkeley), and Raphael Rössel (GHI Washington). Participants: Lucia Alvarez (University of California, Los Angeles), Julie Ault (University of Utah), Eva Baudler (Stanford University), Adam Blackler (University of Wyoming), Grace Buhler (University of Wyoming), Sarah Ernst (University of Southern California), Claire Farnsworth (University of Colorado Boulder), Annika Frieberg (San Diego State University), Heike Friedman (GHI Washington), Charlotte Gibs (University of Southern California), Julian Gillilan (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), Mathew Greenlee (University of Colorado Boulder), Jan Hansen (University of California, San Diego), CJ Headley (University of California, San Diego), Mo Healy (Lewis and Clark College), Zach Henson (University of Colorado, Colorado Springs), Erich Hochman (Southern Methodist University), Milena Kagel (University of Southern California), Stephen Kooshian (University of California, San Diego), Stefan Laffin (University of California, Berkeley), Paul Lerner (University of Southern California), Alex Levine (University of California, Los Angeles), Jennifer Lynn (Montana State University Billings), James McSpadden (University of Nevada, Reno), Eleanor Moseman (Colorado State University), Caitlin Murdock (California State University Long Beach), Sloane Nilsen (University of California, Berkeley), Alexia Orengo Green (University of Southern California),

Glenn Penny (University of California, Los Angeles), Bruno Rios de la Fuente (University of Colorado Boulder), Kara Ritzheimer (Oregon State University), Alexandria Ruble (University of Idaho), Fernanda Sada Jiménez (University of California, Berkeley), Erika Schumacher (University of California Davis), Grace Shaffer (University of Southern California), Cheuk Him Ryan Sun (University of British Columbia), Elizabeth Sun (University of California, Berkeley), Ariel Yingqi Tang (Stanford University), Brett M. Van Hoesen (University of Nevada, Reno), Kathleen Walsh (Washington University in St. Louis), Elissa Watters (University of Southern California), Dorothee Wierling (Professor emerita, University of Hamburg), Kurt Woolford (University of Southern California), Chloe Zheng (University of California, Los Angeles).

The 8th West Coast Germanists' Workshop gathered academics and students from some twenty universities to the University of Colorado Boulder for two days of scholarly exchange. Participants presented and reflected on topics related to the theme, "German History at the Crossroads? New Narratives, Perspectives and Approaches." In opening the conference, David Ciarlo highlighted the dissertation of Mildred Sherwood MacArthur, who between 1914-1917 defended, presented and published her research on the importance of Germans to the state of Colorado at a time when they were treated with hostility by Americans. He then noted that "our workshop – occurring at another moment of transatlantic tension . . . might not only offer an avenue of scholarly exchange . . . but an equally poignant attempt to foster understanding in a time of deep troubles." Ciarlo's hopes came to fruition as the panels, roundtables, keynote, and even breaktimes resulted in respectful dialogue among the forty-seven participants.

The first panel, chaired by Thomas Pegelow Kaplan and titled "Frameworks of Global and Transnational History," started with Stephen Kooshian's presentation focused on German pro-Armenian activism. He argued that Weimar Germany made strides towards demanding accountability for genocide

as prompted by the efforts of disparate groups such as missionaries, the press, and political activists. While the Treaty of Lausanne made an Armenian state impossible, German activists continued to feel a moral obligation to support Armenians via humanitarian aid projects, which constituted an early example of "minority-rights politics." Following Kooshian's remarks, James McSpadden explained his developing book project which seeks to both trace and account for the physical movement of books and other materials located throughout Europe in 1933 to Germany due to Nazi looting, and later to the United States. Rather than restoring stolen texts to their original owners, millions of Nazi insignia-stamped books ended up in the United States, a historical legacy McSpadden argued we must confront even today. Kathleen Walsh then presented on the role *Sammelbilder* played in contributing to concepts of German identity between 1928 and 1938. Instead of a nationalist conception of "Germanness," Walsh suggested a transnational concept of identity, where factors such as language and commodity culture overcame traditional borders, allowing for Austrian involvement in the notion of what it meant to be German.

The next panel was titled "Imagination, the Unconscious, and the History of Emotions" and chaired by Glenn Penny. Claire Farnsworth presented first on letters as evidence for maintained parent-child relationships during the *Kindertransporte*. Farnsworth noted that while some scholars claim that letter-writing was predominantly the province of mothers, the example of Paul Freundlich, a Jewish father who sent his daughter, Erika, to England following the November Pogroms, overturns this standard narrative. She thought his extensive efforts to continue parenting his daughter via letter-writing to be remarkable, especially considering the harsh reality he faced as a Jew trapped in Nazi Germany. Ariel Tang then presented her research on dreams as manifestations of political agency through the lens of Charlotte Beradt's *The Third Reich of Dreams*. Tang explained that dreams of the Third Reich

should be looked at as more than mere chronicles of wartime horror. Rather, they can be viewed as "archives," "prognosis," and "possible histories." In the discussion of their papers, both Tang and Farnsworth responded to comments about the fragmentary nature of their respective source material and reflected on how to navigate research knowing dreams and letters can be frustratingly incomplete.

Raphael Rössel chaired the third panel, "Reading Against the Grain Revisited." Elissa Watters presented first on "Anarchist Strategies in the Interwar German Avant-garde" In her paper, she conducted an analysis of works like those by Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, arguing that his art and that of other Cologne progressives have often been misinterpreted as being inherently communist. However, she argued their works confronted physical spaces, meaning they should be interpreted as distinctly separate from a typical left-right political dichotomy. Kara Ritzheimer then turned our attention to the institution of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel*. Through interpreting Gestapo records that chronicled instances of gossip, rumors, and jokes, Ritzheimer claimed that German citizens blamed the Nazi regime for a perceived increase in promiscuity among teenagers. She then argued that people who produced this negative gossip essentially resisted Nazism, as rumors provided an avenue by which they could judiciously critique the regime. CJ Headley concluded the panel discussing colonial education in German East Africa. He explained that Germany established colonial schools in order to train more workers, and in doing so predominantly employed "native" teachers. In grappling with understanding the liminal space occupied by these teachers, Headley deliberately chose to describe them as "participants" in the colonial regime rather than as collaborators or resistors, reminding us that colonial Africa did not operate as a straightforward top-down regime but in conversation with a multitude of at least semi-autonomous players like native instructors.

Dorothee Wierling delivered the keynote address entitled, "The German Blues: A Historian's Perspective on the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Eastern Germany." Her project used two oral history projects that spanned three cities and multiple generations to account for the contemporary rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party in the East. Overall, Wierling argued that these oral history interviews revealed that East Germans generally perceived themselves to be somewhat ostracized from greater German society, leading them to seek recognition through the nationalist program of the AfD. For interviews targeting those born in the 1920s, Wierling argued that though all of Germany lost the Second World War, East Germans eventually harbored feelings of resentment towards West Germany as it thrived following the country's division. Likewise, the ill-executed reunification of Germany and resultant suffering led East Germans to further resent the West. Wierling then articulated that the AfD provides Germans in the East what they long desired; the ability to feel seen and valued.

Day two commenced with the fourth and final panel entitled "Visual History: Interpretation of Images and Visual Narratives," which was chaired by David Ciarlo. Brett Van Hoesen began with her presentation on zebra prints as a manifestation of "colonial legacy in arts and visual culture" of the Weimar Republic and later global cosmopolitanism. Marianne Brandt's photo assemblage "Untitled [mit Anna Mae Wong]" for example distinctly connected women's fashion with animal exoticism. For Van Hoesen, these allusions to zebra print in fashion, design aesthetics, and even the First World War camouflage nodded to German colonialism while simultaneously endeavoring to downplay the violence of the past. Cheuk Him Ryan Sun then presented "Framing Colonial Exile in German Jewish Refugees' Photograph Albums (1938-1948)." He argued that Shanghai Jewish refugees deliberately constructed family photo albums to present a successful narrative of endurance. While photographs of cats, the

benign, and the journey to Shanghai would seem typical of such an endeavor, the albums also include uncomfortable photographs of non-European peoples, which Ryan Sun argued helped the families "make sense of their displacement and exile in and after Shanghai." Eleanor Moseman concluded the panel presenting on surrealist art and its relationship to resiliency in postwar West Germany. Her presentation centered on the story of Ellida Schargo von Alten, who moved to Worpswede with her family, lost her husband in the Second World War, helped relaunch the postwar career of her new partner, painter Richard Oelze, and supported her family, all while continuing to write and create her own art. Moseman hoped to negate pre-existing stereotypes ignoring von Alten's own unique achievements in creative practice and in the Worpswede community.

A group of five graduate students then presented in a roundtable on the Thyssen fund, a fellowship for which first and second year graduate students can apply to conduct research in German archives for four to six weeks. Fernanda Sada presented first, introducing her research project on taste, sensing, and commodification in German, Austrian, and Mexican coffeehouses. Utilizing the Thyssen fellowship, Sada conducted research in the Landesarchiv Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Stadtarchiv Leipzig, and the Deutsches Archiv der Kulinarik, discovering documents such as the Walter Poganietz collection of cookbooks that helped her research. Mathew Greenlee then introduced his project titled "Discourses on Honor and Humiliation, 1918-1930," which investigates the impact of the Treaty of Versailles on German self-perception in the interwar period. The Thyssen grant allowed Greenlee to research at the Landesarchiv Duisburg and Landesarchiv Münster, where he discovered egodocuments written by Germans under occupation who grappled with complicated feelings of shame and inferiority. Charlotte Gibs then presented her research on women's violence in and surrounding National Socialist concentration camps. During her funded

research trip to Germany, Gibs sought to understand how femininity and womanhood operated within the framework of Nazism by studying at the Jüdisches Museum Berlin, the Bundesarchiv, and the Landesarchiv, finding sources such as *NS-Frauenschaft* documents to support her research. Sloane Nielsen then remarked on how his Thyssen-funded research fundamentally shifted his understanding of the Third Reich. While investigating life at night in Berlin (expecting the Nazis to have utilized the night to maintain control), Nielsen instead learned that nighttime was actually an "environmental condition that destabilized fascism." Alex Levine concluded the panel discussing his research on trends in Protestant missionary work between 1914 and 1960, a time when missionaries had to renegotiate their identities after the collapse of the formal German Empire. He noted that his time at archives like the Basel Mission Archive and the Evangelisches Zentralarchiv Berlin helped him find sources like maps indicating preaching networks. During the discussion, the panelists were asked whether they could realistically have conducted their research via online archives in the United States. The overall response was that while online archives are beneficial, researching on site in Germany proved transformative for their work and they were grateful for the Thyssen foundation for making their travels possible.

The final session of the conference was a roundtable on teaching titled "Teaching and Learning in Universities under Political and Social Pressure." Grace Buhler, a graduate student and secondary school teacher based in Wyoming, noted how in an area where engineering, agricultural studies, and applied science classes are prioritized and the humanities have had to constantly justify their relevance, history teachers need to be intentional, as they "[cultivate] informed and reflective citizens." She recommended Blooms Taxonomy for those looking to improve their pedagogical practices. Erika Schumacher then discussed her experience teaching classes on the Holocaust, advocating for providing more graduate students

(like herself) with opportunities and support to teach while in school. In her own experience, having high standards for students but making assignments low stakes enables students to thoughtfully engage in class. Paul Lerner then reflected on his own fascism-focused class, noting that students flocked to it, evidently a response to the current political moment. He advised that while "[professors] are trained to provide nuance . . . sometimes students need someone to listen," meaning informed and empathetic teachers are needed now more than ever. Jan Hansen relayed a few pieces of advice for those teaching German history, including emphasizing understudied topics in German history, introducing students to the material of the past (such as social orders embedded in public spaces), and making contemporary connections to historical discussions. Participants in the Q&A generally expressed a common fear for the future of teaching German history but felt solace in being able to discuss such topics surrounded by supportive colleagues.

Claire Farnsworth
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