# 31st Transatlantic Doctoral Seminar: German History from the 18th Century to the Present

Seminar at University of California at Berkeley, June 15 – June 18, 2026,. Co-Organized by the German Historical Institute Washington and the BMW Center for German and European Studies, Georgetown University. Conveners: Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown University) and Richard F. Wetzell (GHI). Faculty Mentors: Hannah Ahlheim (University of Gießen), Steven Press (Stanford University), and Isabel Richter (GHI Pacific Office). Participants: Viola Alianov-Rautenberg (GHI Pacific Office), Florian Balbiani (University of Erfurt), Rebecca Epstein-Boley (University of Chicago), Daniel Funke (University of Stuttgart), Johann Gerlieb (University of Leipzig), Jahn Lukas Hermann (University of Mainz), Amy Kerner (GHI Pacific Office), Margaret McCool (Indiana University), Nina Neuscheler (ZZF/University of Potsdam), Benjamin Pfannes (University of Potsdam), Alexandra Raptis (University of Hamburg), Richard Rashid-Smith (York University), Hayley C. Roy (Emory University), Teresa Schenk (Humboldt University), Erika Schumacher (University of California, Davis), Simon Specht (ZZF/Humboldt University).

The 31st Transatlantic Doctoral Seminar in German History brought together doctoral students from universities in the U.S., Germany, and Canada working on dissertations on eighteenth- to twentieth-century German history. The first panel of the seminar, chaired by Anna von der Goltz, began with opening remarks by Rebecca Epstein-Boley and Benjamin Pfannes. Florian Balbiani and Alexandra Raptis presented papers that both dealt with the history of knowledge and German colonialism. Balbiani examined the appropriation, research, and publication of Swahili manuscripts in the 1930s, focusing on two European collectors and their East

African collaborators. He demonstrated that, although this collaboration was built on colonial infrastructures, it was not solely shaped by the Europeans. It was also based on the knowledge practices, networks, interests, and business models of Africans. Raptis stressed that collecting was a crucial part of constructing and teaching science in the nineteenth century. In German South West Africa, German teachers and their students were encouraged to participate in colonial collection networks and interact with their environment in specific ways. Much of the discussion focused on violence in the various forms of colonial knowledge production. Did it always involve "slow violence"? Participants also discussed the agency of African individuals and how to best avoid Eurocentrism when writing the history of European scientists in Africa.

The second panel, chaired by Viola Alianov-Rautenberg, dealt with gender history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Daniel Funke and Simon Specht introduced the papers. Using personal websites as an example, Nina Neuscheler analyzed how the web became structured along gender lines from the 1990s onward. She argued that the women who ran these websites, on the one hand, reproduced "traditional" social roles and, on the other hand, negotiated the expansion of women's roles around the turn of the millennium. These "women's websites"—which anticipated today's social media—also illustrate how the boundary between the private and public spheres shifted online. Teresa Schenk argued that it is impossible to understand the proliferation of naturopathic sanatoriums around 1900 without the promise of an "alternative" treatment experience that was both sensory and emotional. The senses and emotions were a central component not only of the holistic understanding of health, but also of the German naturopathic movement's strategies for fostering a sense of community and distinguishing itself from others. This became particularly clear in the promise of a "gentler" treatment of so-called women's ailments at naturopathic sanatoriums. The ambivalence of modernity emerged as an overarching theme

in both papers, stimulating a lively discussion that touched on the multivalent political dimensions of these phenomena.

Margaret McCool and Johann Gerlieb introduced the papers of the third panel, which was chaired by Richard Wetzell. Richard Rashid-Smith and Jahn Lukas Hermann examined the history of Germans in the world from the perspective of the different ways the two German states employed "soft power" during the Cold War. Rashid-Smith demonstrated that, from 1964 to 1989, the trade unions and youth movements of Tanzania and East Germany made sincere efforts to foster grassroots solidarity between their respective populations. Though these relationships were often imperfect and impeded by larger Cold War developments, they illuminate the alternative relationships pursued by the socialist bloc and postcolonial states. Jahn Lukas Hermann examined the cultural policy dimension of West Germany's early foreign policy. Regarding West German cultural policy toward Poland (and Eastern Europe), relevant memoranda from the Foreign Office revealed that, in addition to trade, the primary means by which the Comecon states were sought to be influenced was through culture. However, despite being the subject of public debate for the first time, the establishment of a West German Goethe Institut was not realized in the 1960s.

On Wednesday, the first panel was chaired by Isabel Richter and introduced by Hayley Roy and Erika Lynn Schumacher. Johann Gerlieb and Daniel Funke presented papers on new diplomatic history in the mid-nineteenth century, both of which were explicitly informed by social science theory. Gerlieb's paper reexamined the cause of the War of 1866. He argued that the political language used at the end of the German Confederation was pivotal. Using the example of a Saxon diplomat in Vienna, Gerlieb reconstructed how deliberate use of political language and once-powerful paradigms were employed in an attempt to prevent a war foreshadowed in the language before it broke out. Funke offered a new perspective on the political relationship between Wilhelm I and Bismarck

— a true "power couple" — by applying the systems-theoretical analytical tool of the "power-intimate partnership." Funke argued that this tool revealed how and under what conditions power inferiority or superiority existed between the monarch and his chancellor. The most important case study was Austrian Silesia in 1866. The discussion focused on the promises and perils of interdisciplinary work, the role of theory in historical research, and the role of language in history and communicating research findings.

Wednesday's second panel, chaired by Hannah Ahlheim and expertly introduced and contextualized by Alexandra Raptis and Florian Balbiani turned the participants' focus to the role of utopias in history. Simon Specht provided a detailed analysis of the "progress" discourse across the twentieth century. Much historical research assumes that the 1970s debates on environmental issues and limits to growth in the Federal Republic of Germany signaled the demise of the focus on "progress." However, closer examination reveals that the concept of progress was rarely rejected entirely. More common were patterns of reinterpretation, reappropriation, and reification of the original concept. Margaret McCool examined human rights discourse in East Germany. She argued that, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the East German Committee for Human Rights (KMR) cemented its position in East Germany and abroad as the face of a socialist human rights campaign. This campaign elicited responses from individuals in various roles related to international human rights. The discussion centered on the tension between utopian thinking and pragmatism, as well as between political aspirations and rhetoric and the realities on the ground.

On Thursday, the first panel featured Teresa Schenk and Jahn Lukas Hermann as commentators and Steven Press as chair. The panel adopted a cultural history lens and took participants back into the late eighteenth and late nineteenth century. Erika Lynn Schumacher analyzed a specific space: Weimar's Park an der Ilm, which was constructed by Duke Carl

August beginning in the 1770s. Despite its combination of conflicting styles and visions of the past, the park presented a unifying narrative of recovering past grandeur to overcome recent decline and welcome a golden age. This narrative perpetuated the myth of Classical Weimar, which maintained traditional rule while promising to educate the public through an open connection with art and nature. Rebecca Epstein-Boley examined itinerant musicians from Bohemian Preßnitz and Bavarian Westpfalz. She argued that these musicians helped create a globalized European entertainment music culture between 1840 and 1914. Contemporaries described musical itinerancy as a problem of moral, social, and musical degradation, treating music itself as the source of itinerant labor's social meaning. The discussion touched on the delineation of "high" and "low" culture and emphasized comparative perspectives on German environmental history.

The seminar's final panel, introduced by Richard Rashid-Smith and Nina Neuscheler and chaired by Amy Kerner, focused on German history from an international perspective during two distinct periods. Hayley Roy examined the transformation of nursing at the turn of the twentieth century in Zanzibar and German East Africa. She contended that histories of nursing in the German context often contrast the trajectory of German nursing with that of other Western nation-states, where nursing is often a higher-status profession than in Germany. She argued that efforts toward nursing standardization cannot be understood without considering the specific needs of colonial doctors and officials. She demonstrated that Zanzibar was a pivotal location for German nurses, as their work was observed and scrutinized by an international audience. Benjamin Pfannes examined U.S. foreign and security policy from the 1980s onward, arguing that it significantly influenced the intensification of Franco-German cooperation during this period. He challenged interpretations identifying the 1986 Reykjavik Conference as the pivotal moment of closer Franco-German military

cooperation. Instead, he demonstrated that the security policy rapprochement between Paris and Bonn began in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

During the concluding discussion of the three-day seminar, participants reflected on what the topics and approaches revealed about broader trends in German history and the discipline as a whole.

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