JUNIOR SCHOLARS CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF GERMAN-JEWISH HISTORY

Conference at the GHI, May 21-22, 2009. Co-organized by the Wissenschaftliche Arbeitsgemeinschaft des Leo Baeck Instituts in Deutschland, the Institute of European Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and the German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C. Convener: Hartmut Berghoff (GHI), Michael Brenner (University of Munich), John Efron (University of California, Berkeley), Marion Kaplan (New York University), Michael Meyer (Leo Baeck Institute, Cincinnati). Participants: Amos Bitzan (University of California, Berkeley), Philipp Graf (Leipzig), Laura Jockusch (Ben Gurion University, Be’er Sheva), Alexander (Ari) Joskowicz (Vanderbilt University), Emily Levine (Yale University), Miriam Rürup (University of Göttingen), Daniel Schwartz (George Washington University), Kate Sorrels (University of Pittsburgh), Mirjam Triendi-Zadoff (University of Munich), Rebekka Voß (Harvard University / University of Düsseldorf).

The conference brought together a transatlantic group of young scholars and senior faculty members in the field of German-Jewish history from North America, Israel, and Germany. Its goal was to assess the state of the field and to discuss possible future directions through presentations of the attendees’ recent projects and historiographical discussions. After introductions by Hartmut Berghoff and Michael Brenner, the conference began with reflections by Marion Kaplan and John Efron about the changes and continuities they have witnessed in the study of German-Jewish history over the past three decades.

Kaplan spoke about the ways in which Alltagsgeschichte, the history of daily life, has transformed the study of German-Jewish history. Kaplan suggested that Alltagsgeschichte encouraged the inclusion of previously marginalized historical actors, such as women, and also shifted the focus away from legal and political milestones, which had once loomed large in histories of German-Jewish emancipation, toward their much more gradual effects on ordinary people. Kaplan also spoke about her latest work on German-Jewish refugees to the Dominican Republic as a transnational history of daily life. Subsequent presenters took up both the notion of transnational history and an approach rooted in the study of daily life.

In his address, Efron commented on the increasing diversity of the pool of scholars writing about the history of German Jewry.
While German-Jewish émigrés dominated the field in the decades immediately following the Second World War, today, the history of German Jewry attracts Jewish and non-Jewish scholars with no familial connections to German Jews. The Junior Scholars Conference, which included participants from the current centers of German-Jewish history, reflected this trend. At the same time, the conference provided an opportunity for this younger generation of scholars to hear from Michael Meyer, a founding figure in the field. In his talk, Meyer conveyed the perspective of that earlier generation of scholars, composed mainly of German-Jewish refugees from the Nazis, like himself. In his autobiographical reflections, Meyer outlined some of the challenges that historians of German Jewry faced in his day, when there were few institutions and frameworks in the academy that supported this field.

In their presentations and in the discussions surrounding them, the junior scholars at the conference ranged chronologically from the early modern period to the postwar years, and methodologically across several disciplines. The first day featured four clusters: “Medieval and Early Modern Influences on Modern German Jewry,” “Intellectual and Cultural History,” “Jewish Responses to Anti-Semitism and Anti-Clericalism,” and “German and East European Jews.”

The first session began with Rebekka Voß’s talk on sixteenth-century Jewish apocalyptic thought. Sketching a world radically different from that of twentieth-century Jewish life, Voß focused on Jewish-Christian polemics about the Messianic Age. Her use of Yiddish sources in addition to Latin and Hebrew literature sparked a discussion about distinctions between “popular” and “high” culture. Voß presented her project as a contribution both to early modern German-Jewish history, still understudied, and an attempt to better understand the religious atmosphere of sixteenth-century Germany. Daniel Schwartz’s presentation then connected the early modern period to nineteenth-century German-Jewish intellectual and cultural history. His talk discussed the “rehabilitation” of Spinoza as a Jewish figure by German-Jewish writers beginning in the early 1800s. He observed that the reception of Spinoza among German Jews was bound up with the reception of the eighteenth-century thinker Moses Mendelssohn. Both of them emerged as icons of German-Jewish modernity, and Schwartz conceived of his work as a genealogy of modern Jewish identity.
In the second session, Emily Levine and Miriam Rürup presented their respective attempts to find “new contexts” for German-Jewish intellectual and cultural history. Levine used her work on Aby Warburg and Ernst Cassirer in the city of Hamburg as an entry to intellectual histories situated around particular urban spaces as well as family and friendship networks. Levine’s presentation also addressed the question of the “Jewishness” or “Germanness” of her subjects. Such questions of identity also animated Rürup’s talk about Jewish student fraternities and her preview of a future project on voluntary statelessness. Both speakers reflected on the contours of the field, asking about the boundaries separating Jewish, German, European, and other possible histories.

The transnational thread continued in the third session with presentations by Ari Joskowicz and Katherine Sorrels. Joskowicz used his work about interactions among French and German Jews involved in anti-clerical causes to argue for a reconceptualization of transnational history. He suggested that the historical actors in such histories do not need to have transnational identities. The modifier “transnational” should rather be understood as describing interactions among subjects and, more importantly, the historian’s approach to the past (comparative, spanning multiple national contexts). Joskowicz also used this opportunity to dispute characterizations of Jews as “subaltern” or “post-colonial” subjects. Sorrels’s presentation sought to highlight the transnational, European identities of Jewish writers in Central Europe from the late nineteenth century to the Cold War period.

The fourth session attempted to expand the (perceived) boundaries of German-Jewish historiography by tackling the question of relations among German and East European Jews. Amos Bitzan took the case of a Galician-Jewish officer who served in the Habsburg army during the First World War as a paradigmatic example in his talk. The officer represented East European Jews who could pass as “German Jews” but who still retained East European-Jewish allegiances. Bitzan asked how such personalities might be integrated into the more familiar narrative of German Jews encountering an East European Jewish other. Phillip Graf also sought to unbalance the particularly “German” narrative of German-Jewish history in his presentation. His talk centered around the 1933 “Bernheim” petition, in which the Paris-based Comité des Délégations Juives filed a complaint about the treatment of German Jews in Upper
Silesia by the Nazi government with the League of Nations. Graf pushed for an understanding of the German-Jewish condition as transnational and diasporic. He suggested that the case of the Jews of Upper Silesia, a peripheral community on Germany's frontier, and the (at least temporarily) successful intervention on their behalf by outside players might lead us to correct our reading of the Jews of Germany as homogeneously German.

The presentations concluded with talks by Mirjam Triendl-Zadoff and Laura Jockusch. Triendl-Zadoff presented a rich family history that explored the German-Jewish identity of the socialist Werner Scholem, interweaving the stories of his wife Emmy Wiechelt, a worker and SPD activist, and of his more famous brother, Gershom (Gerhard), who emigrated to Palestine and became a pioneering scholar of Jewish mysticism. The linked lives of the Scholems and Werner and Emmy’s daughters, Triendl-Zadoff concluded, convey a very different German-Jewish experience than the familiar biography of Gershom Scholem does when read alone.

Laura Jockusch’s presentation switched gears to the post-World War II period. She outlined how the “surviving remnant” of Jewish Holocaust survivors, many of them living in displaced person camps in Germany immediately after the war, imagined post-Holocaust justice, participated on the margins of the Allies’ war crimes tribunals, and sought justice in alternative Jewish proceedings. Jockusch acknowledged that, in her account of postwar “German-Jewish history,” the modifier “German” ought to be understood primarily as a geographic designation. Like Graf, she asked how her work might fit into the field of German-Jewish history.

The conference closed with an open roundtable discussion among the participants. In summarizing the changes in the field, Meyer referred to a list of four things that the conference did not include: histories of particular German-Jewish communities, accounts of central communal institutions, narratives about particularly prominent German-Jewish personalities, and frameworks such as acculturation or assimilation. The absences seem to testify to the expansion of the field and of junior scholars’ immersion in the questions and methodologies driving research across the humanities and the social sciences.

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