

BEYOND THE RACIAL STATE: RETHINKING NAZI GERMANY

Conference at Indiana University, Bloomington, October 23-25, 2009. Co-organized by the GHI Washington and the following institutions at Indiana University, Bloomington: the Borns Jewish Studies Program, the Center for Arts and Humanities, West European Studies, and the Office of the Vice President for International Affairs, with major assistance from the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). Conveners: Devin Pendas (Boston College), Mark Roseman (Indiana University), and Richard F. Wetzell (GHI). Participants: Monica Black (Furman University), Donald Bloxham (University of Edinburgh), Doris Bergen (University of Toronto), Richard Bessel (University of York), Michel Chaouli (Indiana University), Rita Chin (University of Michigan), Winson Chu (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), Herwig Czech (Documentation Center of the Austrian Resistance, Vienna), Edward Ross Dickinson (University of California at Davis), Jim Diehl (Indiana University), Sara Friedman (Indiana University), Pascal Grosse (Klinik und Poliklinik für Neurologie Charité-Universitätsmedizin Berlin), Frieder Günther (Stiftung Bundespräsident-Theodor-Heuss-Haus, Stuttgart), Carl Ipsen (Indiana University), Marion Kaplan (New York University), Martina Kessel (University of Bielefeld), Claudia Koonz (Duke University), Eric Kurlander (Stetson University), Jürgen Matthäus (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC), Jason McGraw (Indiana University), Michael Meng (Davidson College), A. Dirk Moses (University of Sydney), Michelle Moyd (Indiana University), Regina Mühlhäuser (Hamburg Institute for Social Research), Roberta Pergher (University of Kansas), Julia Roos (Indiana University), Dirk Rupnow (Institut für Zeitgeschichte, University of Innsbruck), Richard Steigmann-Gall (Kent State University), Nicholas Stargardt (Magdalen College), Alexa Stiller (University of Bern), Ben Thorne (Indiana University), Annette Timm (University of Calgary), Jeff Veidlinger (Indiana University), Gerhard Wolf (University of Sussex), Jürgen Zimmerer (University of Sheffield).

Over the past fifteen or twenty years, scholarship on the Third Reich has increasingly recognized the centrality of racial thought to the formulation of policy in a wide array of fields. During the 1980s, scholars began to depict the Third Reich as, in Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann's resonant phrase, a "racial state." Moving away from an exclusive focus on anti-Semitism, this racial turn broadened the understanding of Nazi racial policy. It expanded awareness of the range of Nazi victims, incorporating, for instance,

the murder of the mentally and physically handicapped, and also the sterilization and incarceration of people considered “asocial,” into a comprehensive account of Nazi biopolitics. This approach also broached the question of how broad the support for Nazi racial policies was, interrogating the extent to which ordinary Germans cooperated in the projects of the racial state, for instance, as mothers of “Aryan” children or as supervisors of “racially inferior” forced laborers.

While the benefits of this approach have been significant, it has become increasingly clear in the last few years that the racial state paradigm has begun to obscure as much as it reveals about the reality of the Third Reich. First, this approach tends to reify race as an epistemological category, presenting it as more coherent and comprehensive than it in fact was. The Nazis themselves were aware of the internal tensions and contradictions that plagued any effort to articulate a coherent and comprehensive racial “science.” Second, the ongoing salience of alternative categories of identity in the Third Reich (ethnic, *völkisch*, religious, class-based) is difficult to explain within the racial state paradigm. Third, the racial turn blurs the tensions between, on the one hand, specifically racial ideas and policies and, on the other hand, broader traditions of domination and empire-building that acquired at most a superficial racial gloss during the Third Reich. Questions of military necessity or economic advantage coexisted with biopolitical projects.

The first conference panel, “Race, Empire, Ethnicity,” examined notions of race prior to the establishment of the Third Reich. Pascal Grosse’s paper argued that racial discourse since the eighteenth century should not be regarded as the intellectual incubator of Nazi racial policy, but as “a matrix composed of many different discursive elements” that “do not constitute a systematic unity.” Although the eugenic debates in pre-1914 German colonial politics resonated with Nazi racial policy in many respects, they were “fluid thought experiments” rather than a precursor of Nazi biopolitics. Jürgen Zimmerer’s paper offered a postcolonial reading of Nazi empire and located the Nazi project in Eastern Europe within the history of German and European colonialism. The Nazis’ imperialist aims in Eastern Europe mandated the obliteration of the culture of the colonized peoples, as had been the case nearly half a century earlier in German Southwest Africa. Such “cultural genocide” required an absolute Other that was created through ideas of racial difference.

Although one should not speak of a “causal nexus” between German colonial rule in Southwest Africa and the Nazi occupation of Eastern Europe, Zimmerer concluded that there is a “continuity” between the two sets of events. Winson Chu challenged the paradigm of a *völkisch* turn in Weimar Germany by arguing that right-wing groups were permeated by disagreement and conflict. In particular, he demonstrated the need to distinguish territorial revisionism and irredentism from *völkisch* activism.

The second conference panel, “Nazism and Race: The Big Picture,” challenged the concept of race as a category of analysis. A. Dirk Moses proposed that, although the language of race permeated the Third Reich, race was not the motivating impetus behind the Nazi imperialist project or the Holocaust. Instead, issues of security drove the agents of genocide. Not races, but rather people, populated the *völkisch* imagination, and enemy peoples posed a threat to the German *Volk*. In this worldview, Jews were “partisans,” bearers of bolshevism, and, along with Soviet civilians, “were targeted *preemptively* and often *collectively* to forestall future resistance.” Similarly, Mark Roseman’s paper argued that “biological thinking was not a prerequisite for genocide” and that a “more generalized sense of ethnicity” proliferated. Nazi racial thought was often more nationalistic than biological, and the unity of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, not the Aryan *Rasse*, was the subject of nationalist zeal. The danger that the Jews represented in the minds of the Nazis, Roseman contended, “was less that of substandard individuals threatening the health of the *Volk* than of an international conspiracy.” Jews came to be seen as an enemy state. Roberta Pergher concluded the panel by evaluating the concept of the racial state in Fascist Italy. Her paper criticized the traditional narrative that pressure from the Nazi racial state fueled the Italian race laws, arguing that notions of *razza*, while perhaps even more incoherent than in Germany, had currency within Italy. While noting that pressure to keep up with Nazi Germany was a concern for Mussolini, Pergher showed that racialized notions of belonging and cultural homogeneity spurred Fascist domestic projects, while racial policy went hand-in-hand with Fascist Italy’s imperialist quest.

The third panel was devoted to “Race and Nazi Racial Policy.” In contrast to analyses of racial concepts and ideology, Jürgen Matthäus examined the racial policies and practices of the early Third Reich. Matthäus’ paper highlighted the interaction between

Party activists and traditional bureaucrats. The “mutual give and take” in this interaction produced an escalation of racial policy, where “the bureaucracy became Nazified and more radical, while Nazi agencies became bureaucratized and more efficient.” Richard Steigmann-Gall’s paper scrutinized the mutability of Nazi racial categories and the paradox of immutable Jewishness. While race was dominant in the vocabulary of difference, Nazi efforts to find an adequate definition of Jewishness relied on extra-racial—especially religious—elements. Jewishness in the Third Reich thus became far more fluid than the rhetoric of Nazi anti-Semitism would suggest. Ben Thorne closed the panel by evaluating the failure of the racial state paradigm to explain the persecution of the Roma in Romania. Thorne’s paper showed that, despite serious racial and eugenic inquiries into the “Gypsy Problem,” economic or military concerns often trumped racial imperatives, and, where race was influential, crude racism—not the coherent ideology of the racial state—lay at the heart of Romanian policies toward the Roma.

The first day of the conference concluded with an evening address by Donald Bloxham that was co-sponsored by Indiana University’s Institute for Advanced Study. Bloxham’s lecture, “The Final Solution in European Perspective,” advocated a holistic account of the Holocaust within an “international relations of genocide,” eschewing the traditional Germanocentric chronicle for an approach that interweaves a multiplicity of national, genocidal narratives.

Conference participants reconvened on the second day for panel four on “Race in Science and Scholarship.” Herwig Czech’s paper drew attention to the limits of the racial state paradigm by examining Nazi medical crimes, most notably the T4 euthanasia program. He emphasized a lack of continuity between the racial-hygienic impetus of sterilization and the medical killings of the “euthanasia” program. Whereas sterilization addressed eugenic fears of biological inferiority spreading to future generations, the euthanasia killings were primarily motivated by economic concerns, targeting mental patients who were considered “unproductive.” Dirk Rupnow’s paper focused on *Judenforschung* (research on Jews and Jewish life) during the Third Reich, arguing that, for the most part, the Third Reich’s *Judenforschung* was not designed, as one might have thought, to provide a scholarly basis for Nazi anti-Semitism, but to historicize the Jewish question from an anti-Semitic perspective. In the panel’s final paper, Frieder Günther called for a reevaluation of the

periodization of twentieth-century German history, arguing that an overemphasis on 1945 and the “Zero Hour” obscures trends and transformations that extend beyond the temporal boundaries of the Third Reich. Günther’s analysis of right-wing intellectual debates during the period 1920–60 revealed that a number of intellectuals sought order and stability as their primary goal and only adopted Nazi racial discourse to achieve these ends, quickly abandoning the Nazi program after 1945.

“Race and German Society” was the theme of the fifth panel, which investigated how Germans could be harnessed to the Nazi state in a variety of ways. Eric Kurlander’s paper explored the activities of Gertrud Bäumer and her left-liberal colleagues during the Third Reich, positing that their cautious, selective investment in the National Socialist state constituted an attempt to “carve out a space for compassion” between free-market liberalism and socialism. Martina Kessel examined the ways that humor and joking continuously redefined the differences between the self and the Other. Humor did not always solidify racial boundaries, but often blurred them or highlighted differences outside the discourse of race. In the panel’s final paper, on the *Lebensborn* program, Annette Timm criticized the racial state paradigm for obfuscating interactions between race, gender, and class that should be seen as dynamic and fluid. In particular, she suggested that historians need to be more attentive to the emotional aspects of sexuality, which, she argued, provided some Germans with powerful incentives for accepting Nazi racial policy.

The conference’s sixth panel turned eastward to contemplate “Race, Citizenship and Empire in the East.” Michael Meng addressed a lacuna in German colonialism studies, namely a lack of focus on German imperial projects in Europe. Meng’s paper showed that Nazi conceptions of the East as imperial space built upon decades of German colonial fantasies, though the concept of the East remained, in actuality, “exceptionally amorphous.” In the panel’s second paper, Alexa Stiller examined how millions of people from annexed and occupied areas were pragmatically incorporated into the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Stiller’s paper revealed that the primary criterion for inclusion was a *völkisch* or ethnic idea of Germanness, often considered in terms of “good blood” and ancestry, which was supplemented by related, but secondary factors such as race or productivity. Gerhard Wolf’s paper focused on the selection criteria of

the *Deutsche Volksliste* and competing approaches to Germanization policy. His paper, too, emphasized the importance of inclusion and assimilation based on *völkisch* criteria rather than exclusion based on racial criteria in Nazi population policy.

The second day of the conference concluded with a panel on “Race in Wartime.” Nicholas Stargardt began the panel with a paper asking how Germans were “able to go on fighting a world war until they were utterly defeated?” Stargardt urged a rethinking of the “psychological periodization” of World War II, shifting focus from viewing the Battle of Stalingrad in 1943 as a turning point, to a broader, escalating middle period of 1941–44, during which time, “the worse the war went, the more effort had to be made simply in order to stave off defeat.” Regina Mühlhäuser’s paper examined how Nazi authorities dealt with sexual encounters and sexual violence between German soldiers and local inhabitants in the East. While the specific practices of the SS and Wehrmacht diverged, both favored regulating (and facilitating) soldiers’ heterosexual activity, even with women of supposedly inferior races, rather than trying to suppress it. Richard Bessel concluded the panel with a paper calling for more analysis of the final months of the war and the apparent disappearance of the racial state. His paper showed that the proliferation of “race” was a product of the regime, but not the source of its cohesion. The source, he contended, resided in Nazism’s extraordinary embrace of violence as a guiding principle and cultural norm.

The final day of the conference commenced with a panel on the “Aftermath” of the racial state in postwar Germany. Devin Pendas’ paper reconstructed the murder of Dr. Hans Hannemann, a Jewish Czech living in Berlin, in the final days of the war. He also analyzed the failed postwar efforts to bring the perpetrators to trial. Pendas’ paper revealed that the prosecution of the case was abandoned when it got caught in mounting Cold War tensions within Germany. In her paper, Rita Chin showed that, despite the (over)saturation of race in the historiography of Nazism, historians have only rarely considered the possibility that race may elucidate elements of the Federal Republic’s history. Finally, Monica Black examined reports from Danube Swabian expellees of “partisan sickness” among members of the Yugoslav population. Her paper argued that stories of partisan “blood-drinkers” reveal much about the experience of World War Two on consciousness; the stories constituted an

articulation of “a mental world in which very old ideas ran up against modern, ethnic warfare and racial ideology.”

The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion featuring presentations by Marion Kaplan, Claudia Koonz, Jürgen Matthäus, Nick Stargardt, and Richard Wetzell. Marion Kaplan began by harking back to the conference “Reevaluating the Third Reich,” which took place at the University of Pennsylvania in 1988, and which marked a shift from a Marxian class perspective on National Socialism, as represented by Tim Mason, to one focused on eugenics and racism, as represented at that conference by Detlev Peukert. There was general agreement that, over the past two decades since that conference, the racial state paradigm has made a signal contribution by showing that Nazi biopolitical racism reached beyond the persecution and murder of the Jews to target an array of other groups, including the forced sterilization of the supposedly “genetically defective,” the “euthanasia” murder of the handicapped and mentally ill, the murder of Sinti and Roma in the death camps, the internment in concentration camps of homosexuals and supposed “asocials,” many of whom perished there, and the brutal and often deadly treatment of forced laborers and Soviet prisoners of war. Despite that achievement, Kaplan argued, the pendulum has now swung too far in the direction of race, so that we now need to reintegrate class and economics into our historical analyses in order to achieve a “balancing act” between the Nazi regime’s racisms and economic aims. Claudia Koonz made the case that the “racial state” paradigm’s “lumping together” of diverse target groups under the rubric of “scientific racism” missed important differences, and therefore suggested that historians use terms such as Judeophobia, Gypsyphobia, homophobia, and Slavophobia to name and analyze the prejudice and persecution of specific groups. Jürgen Matthäus criticized the recent turn to *Täterforschung* (research on the perpetrators) for focusing on the question of motivation at the expense of the institutional and social contexts within which the perpetrators operated, and for concentrating on the murder of the Jews while almost entirely ignoring other victim groups. Nick Stargardt contended that the racial state narrative has neglected social and cultural history, and he made a plea for paying more attention to subjectivity and psychology. Richard Wetzell argued that the racial state paradigm’s monolithic image of the human sciences under the Nazi regime ignores important differences—between eugenics and euthanasia, for instance—as well as instances of dissent

and debate within the realm of Nazi biopolitics. He also suggested that the boundary between *Volksgemeinschaft* and “community aliens” was not as stable as is often assumed, because definitions of biological inferiority, such as “feeble-mindedness,” were often quite malleable, making every German a potential target of Nazi biopolitics. Finally, he reiterated a point made repeatedly during the conference, namely that it might be time to counterbalance the racial state paradigm’s focus on a long-term “fatal racist dynamism” (Peukert) by paying closer attention to the rupture of 1933 and the nature of the Nazi state.

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