The German Historical Institute’s work focuses on modern history, especially the twentieth century. This does not mean, however, that the Institute neglects earlier periods. This issue of the Bulletin reflects the Institute’s abiding interest in the early modern era. The first article presents Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger’s 2010 Annual Lecture on the role of rituals in politics. Conceptualizing ritual as an act of “social magic” that at once transforms reality and reinforces its basic social principles, Stollberg-Rilinger elucidates the functioning of rituals in the early modern era by examining the feudal investiture of imperial princes in the Holy Roman Empire. She augments this analysis with comparative reflections on the role of political rituals in the early modern era and today. Since the founding norms of modern states are preserved in a written document, it is no longer as imperative to ritually stage the constitutional order as it was in the premodern period, when the order’s validity could be upheld only through a complex nexus of rituals. Nevertheless, as the example of President Barack Obama’s inauguration – which included the famous slip-up in the wording of the oath of office – demonstrates, we should not underestimate the significance of rituals in the present. David Luebke’s insightful comment inquires to what extent political rituals at all levels of society were instrumentalized by the parties involved; calls attention to the profound shift, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries that transformed the homage ritual from an act of negotiation into an instrument of acclamation; and draws out the implications of Stollberg-Rilinger’s analysis for larger historiographical debates on the history and decline of the Holy Roman Empire.

As we do every spring, this Bulletin issue presents the work of the two winners of the Fritz Stern Dissertation Prize, awarded annually by the Friends of the German Historical Institute for the two best dissertations in German history written at North American universities. Extending this issue’s focus on early modern history, Yair Mintzker discusses his research on the defortification of German cities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The demolition of city walls, he argues, was a significant historical moment that signaled a transformation of the urban environment on three interrelated levels: the city’s ability to defend itself from external intervention; public security within the city; and the symbolic level, that is, the way
burghers and foreigners imagined the urban community. Only after appreciating both the functions and the symbolic meaning of early modern city walls, he contends, can we begin to understand why they were demolished in such great numbers and why defortification was perceived as a dramatic event by the urban community.

The second Stern Prize Winner, Alice Weinreb, offers an overview of her dissertation on “The Politics of Food in Divided Germany, 1945-1971,” exploring the ways in which food concerns, nutritional policies, and hunger fantasies shaped the development of the two postwar German states. In order to understand the category of hunger in postwar Germany, she reaches back to the deprivations of the First World War and the specific “hunger rhetoric” that was central to Hitler’s popularity. Her analysis of the postwar period focuses on comparative studies of school lunch programs, factory canteens, and home cooking in the two German states. Concerns over food, hunger, and nutrition, she concludes, connected schools, factories and private homes and were central for postwar refashions of the worker, child and housewife as well as for the postwar definitions of communism, capitalism, and democracy.

In the “GHI Research” section, we present the GHI’s latest collaborative research project “Transatlantic Perspectives: Europe in the Eyes of European Immigrants to the United States, 1940-1980,” a four-year project funded through a grant from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung). This project seeks to trace transcultural perspectives on Europe and the emergence of hybrid European identities among European immigrants and émigrés in the United States between the 1940s and 1970s. The main research questions investigated by the project include: How did immigrants who left the continent under a variety of circumstances look back at Europe? How did their views inform broader American perceptions of Europe? Did they manage to bring European perspectives into a postwar transatlantic world dominated by the United States? To what degree were they able to impact European debates regarding European identity, which drew so heavily on the contrast with the United States in the twentieth century?

This issue’s conference reports reflect the great diversity of research topics pursued at the German Historical Institute, ranging from the history of beauty to the Nuclear Crisis of the 1980s to the concept of the “generation” as a historical category of analysis. Our “News” section begins with a sad item, an obituary for former GHI Research Fellow
Elisabeth Glaser, whose death the Institute mourns. Most of the rest of the section reports on a variety of prizes, both those awarded by the Institute and the Friends of the GHI – such as the Fritz Stern Dissertation Prize and the Franz Steiner Prize – and those won by the Institute, including the Washington Humanities Council’s Partner Award and the James Harvey Robinson Prize of the American Historical Association (awarded to the GHI’s “German History in Documents and Images” Project) as well as – last but not least – the three book awards won by GHI publications this past year. Please check the event calendar at the end of this issue as well as our website www.ghi-dc.org for the rich array of upcoming events and conferences. We look forward to welcoming you at one of our events soon.

Hartmut Berghoff, Director