This past spring the German Historical Institute in Washington celebrated its 25th anniversary. The highlight of the Festakt on May 17, 2012, which was attended by more than 150 guests and colleagues, was David Blackbourn’s lecture on “Germany and the Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1820.” In the lecture, which is published in this issue of the Bulletin, Blackbourn challenges the stereotype that whereas the British in this era had an industrial revolution and the French a political revolution, the Germans merely had a “reading revolution” — that Germans “only thought while others acted.” Although the Germans had no empire overseas, Blackbourn demonstrates that they had a global presence in international trade and created remarkable transatlantic networks and that German ideas and practices — from mining and scientific forestry to music and education — had a far-reaching impact across the globe, especially in Great Britain and America.

Addressing the question of German history’s “dark side” in his conclusion, Blackbourn argues that the key continuities linking Nazism to the nineteenth century belong almost entirely to the late nineteenth century, that is, to the German Kaiserreich. This point is taken up in James Retallack’s article on “elections without democracy” in Imperial Germany, which originated in a public lecture delivered in the GHI’s spring 2012 lecture series on the history of elections. Retallack challenges recent interpretations which have contended that Imperial Germany’s universal manhood suffrage, combined with strict adherence to electoral procedure, gave the monarchy’s political opponents a foothold and thus led to a significant democratization of the Kaiserreich. By contrast, in his case study of the 1893 Reichstag elections, Retallack argues that modern mass elections had highly ambivalent consequences because the enemies of democracy learned to use the new rabble-rousing style of mass politics for their own purposes. Not just radical fringe parties but conservatives targeted German Jews with belligerent anti-Semitic rhetoric. Although this mainstreaming of anti-Semitism in mass elections foreshadows the rise of Nazism, Retallack concludes by suggesting that the latter cannot be understood without the impact of the First World War.

The aftermath of Nazism is addressed in Ulrike Weckel’s article on German responses to Allied screenings of films documenting Nazi atrocities. This article summarizes the argument of her book
Beschämende Bilder, which was published in the GHI book series Transatlantische Historische Studien earlier this year and won the GHI’s Franz Steiner Prize as well as the 2012 Carl-Erdmann-Preis für herausragende Habilitationen of the German Historikerband (Historical Association). Moving beyond the prevailing interpretation that Allied attempts to reeducate Germans through the visual documentation of liberated camps were a failure, Weckel redirects our attention from German guilt to German shame by focusing on the fact that the atrocity films presented “shameful images” designed to shame Germans. Nearly all German viewers of atrocity films, she concludes, were susceptible to being shamed. With shame, however, not much was achieved in terms of reeducation since shaming people did not increase their readiness to come to terms with the source of the shame but was more likely to lead to resentment against those doing the shaming.

A very different impact of Nazism is examined in Catherine Epstein’s article, which is based on her presentation at the GHI conference “The Second Generation: German Émigré Historians in the Transatlantic World, 1945 to the Present,” organized on the occasion of the Institute’s 25th anniversary this past May (see the “Conference Reports” section). Pursuing a long-standing GHI interest that originated with the Institute’s very first conference (1988), which examined the work of the first generation of German-speaking refugee historians (those who had received their training as historians in Germany before emigrating), this year’s anniversary conference examined the work and influence of the “second generation” of German émigré historians, that is, those who fled Nazi Germany as minors and received their university training as historians in the United States — a group of scholars that played a key role in promoting the internationalization of the American university, helped a younger generation of German scholars create a democratic academic culture, and shaped German-American relations in the second half of the twentieth century. Epstein’s article provides a survey of their training at American universities dominated by the Western civilization paradigm, their careers in the context of the rapid expansion of the field of European history in the United States, their political outlook, and their interactions with the first generation of refugee historians and with non-refugee colleagues in their own cohort. Epstein also shows that although many of them later trained the current generation of Holocaust scholars, most second-generation émigré historians focused on explaining the Nazi seizure of power 1933 — rather than studying the Holocaust.
Christina Lubinski’s article in the “GHI Research” section demonstrates that the GHI is committed not only to German history but also to transnational and global history. Lubinski examines the late-nineteenth-century expansion of Western gramophone companies into India as an example of Western companies’ international ambitions during the era of an increasingly integrated world economy prior to 1914. Among the challenges these companies faced were the diversity of local customs, languages, and musical tastes as well as rising Indian nationalism. Lubinski argues that several of the strategies these companies developed in India, such as the adaptation of the music portfolio to local tastes and the cooperation with local entrepreneurs, helped them achieve success in multiple markets during the interwar period.

The conference reports in this issue once again reflect the diversity of historical research supported by the GHI. The topics examined range from the history of statelessness to the globalization of African-American consumer culture, and from the role of transatlantic contacts in the history of post-1945 social reform to the history of youth organizations. The calendar of events in our “News” section informs you of upcoming GHI events and conferences. We hope to have kindled your interest and look forward to welcoming you at a GHI event in the near future.

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