Conference at the GHI Washington, May 18 – 19, 2012. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington, the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, and the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin and Gerd Bucerius. Conveners: Andreas W. Daum (State University of New York at Buffalo), James J. Sheehan (Stanford University), Hartmut Lehmann (University of Kiel), Hartmut Berghoff (GHI). Participants: Peter Alter (University of Duisburg-Essen), Steven E. Aschheim (Hebrew University, Jerusalem), Doris L. Bergen (University of Toronto), Volker R. Berghahn (Columbia University), Uta-Renate Blumenthal (Catholic University of America), Clelia Caruso (GHI), Carola Dietze (Kulturwissenschaftliches Kolleg, Konstanz), Catherine A. Epstein (Amherst College), Hanna Holborn Gray (University of Chicago), Atina Grossmann (The Cooper Union, New York), Jeffrey Herf (University of Maryland), Georg G. Iggers (State University of New York at Buffalo), Konrad H. Jarausch (University of North Carolina and Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, Potsdam), Marion A. Kaplan (New York University), Jürgen Kocka (Humboldt University, Berlin), Tilmann Lahme (Göttingen), Marjorie Lamberti (Middlebury College), Merel Leeman (University of Amsterdam), Silke Lehmann (Kiel), Jürgen Matthäus (Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, Washington, DC), Frank Mecklenburg (Leo Baeck Institute, New York), Jerry Z. Muller (Catholic University of America), Peter Paret (Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton), Gerhard A. Ritter (Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich), Philipp Stelzel (Boston College), Fritz Stern (Columbia University), Shulamit Volkov (Tel Aviv University), Gerhard L. Weinberg (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

This conference brought together historians from various countries and generations to discuss a chapter in the transatlantic history of historiography that, so far, has not been studied systematically. The participants dealt with the lives and oeuvres of those men and women who became historians in the United States, England and Israel after having escaped Nazi Germany as children and teenagers. Since this conference coincided with the anniversary celebration of the GHI, a large number of additional guests from both sides of the Atlantic filled the seminar room.

Names such as Hans Baron, Felix Gilbert, Hajo Holborn, Ernst Kantorowicz, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and Hans Rosenberg represent the first generation of emigrants who left Nazi Germany to continue
their careers, many for good, in the United States. All of them had concluded their academic training by the time the Nazis seized power in Germany. In contrast, those who left Europe at a much younger age constituted a cohort whose academic training was still to come, only to see their careers unfold in the United States, but also in England and Israel. These scholars of the “second generation,” many of whom were of Jewish background, stood in the center of the conference. Some of them — Renate Bridenthal, Hanna Holborn Gray, Georg Iggers, Peter Paret, Fritz Stern, and Gerhard Weinberg — were able to attend the conference and greatly enriched the discussions. Others featured prominently in the conference’s discussions, among them Werner Angress, Klaus Epstein, Henry Friedlander, Saul Friedländer, Peter Gay, Klemens von Klemperer, Walter Laqueur, Michael A. Meyer, George Mosse, Gerda Lerner, Arno Mayer, Hans Rogger, Ismar Schorsch, and Hans L. Trefousse.

As Andreas Daum emphasized in his introduction, the “second generation” was anything but a homogeneous group. Personal experiences varied as dramatically as choices of topics and methodologies. These scholars would embark on multiple themes that often cut across national boundaries. German history and the Holocaust stood at the center of the works of some but not of all of them. To what extent, then, did the “second generation’s” origin in and intellectual familiarity with German-speaking Europe matter — for them personally, for their research, and for their audiences? Which parts of this heritage mattered, and in which context? What impact did these scholars have, and on whom? Furthermore, the forms of disassociation from Germany but also the desire to reconnect with that country varied significantly among these historians, who were also influenced by the political developments of the Cold War era and the massive expansion of higher education.

The first panel of the conference, chaired by Hartmut Berghoff, provided a survey of the “second generation” and two case studies. Catherine Epstein introduced the audience to the role that the younger émigré historians played in American academia at large. She emphasized the great variety of personalities, themes, and experiences. The “second generation” émigrés, so Epstein, saw themselves primarily as American historians. Their works often, but by no means exclusively, dealt with German history; very few addressed the Holocaust directly. In her paper, Marjorie Lamberti, too, argued against drawing easy conclusions from the fact that young
émigrés brought with them a distinct cultural baggage, such as an appreciation of German-style Bildung. Lamberti concentrated on the careers of Gerda Lerner and Hanna Holborn Gray. Lerner played a key role in establishing women’s history in the United States, and her political stance was heavily influenced by the illiberality of the McCarthy years. Only late in her life did she begin to reflect explicitly on her Jewish and German background. In contrast, Gray’s work as a historian of the Renaissance was directly influenced by émigrés of the “first generation.” She overcame boundaries in different ways, as the first female provost of Yale University and the first female president of the University of Chicago. In her comment, Uta-Renate Blumental emphasized the importance for the “second generation” of European intellectual traditions and forms of academic training that were not at all in conflict with efforts to modernize American higher education, as in Gray’s case. The second commentator, Atina Grossmann, suggested taking seriously the particular, if only partial, “otherness” of émigrés. The latter distinguished themselves from others through forms of habitus and style. In the case of Lerner and Gray, however, gender politics might have mattered more than a “refugee effect” in adapting to but also in changing academic environments.

The second panel, chaired by Jürgen Matthäus, concentrated on the role that anti-Semitism and the Holocaust played in the “second generation.” Jeffrey Herf argued that émigrés brought both issues from the margins into the mainstream of historical scholarship, though in each case with distinct interests. Herf highlighted the works of Walter Laqueur, George Mosse, Fritz Stern, and Peter Gay in the United States, Peter Pulzer in England, and Saul Friedländer, who worked for many years in France, Switzerland and Israel. He also drew attention to the intellectual stimuli from researchers in the field of political science. Doris Bergen focused on three émigré historians and the ways in which they contributed to constituting the field of Holocaust Studies: Raul Hilberg with his emphasis on researching the step-by-step bureaucratic process culminating in the Holocaust; Gerhard Weinberg, with his insistence on a source-based inquiry that captures both the global and the ideological origins of the Holocaust; and Henry Friedlander, who stressed the diversity of groups in European society that fell victim to the Nazis’ genocidal policies. In her comment, Marion Kaplan emphasized how the scholars addressed in these two papers encouraged the following generation of students, especially women students, to venture into then still under-researched areas, specifically the situation and perceptions
of Jewish victims. Delivering the second comment, Steven Aschheim pointed out that German-Jewish émigrés gave historical questions a different texture. As exemplified by the works of Saul Friedländer, they wrote agency into the story of why and how the Holocaust happened. Aschheim also encouraged the audience to reflect more vigorously on the meaning of what constitutes an “outside” perspective in historiography.

The conference’s third panel, chaired by Jerry Muller, provided a close reading of the oeuvres of three historians. Merel Leeman examined Peter Gay and George Mosse as cultural mediators between Germany and the United States. She argued that both saw the United States as the true intellectual successor of the best of Weimar culture and were particularly inspired by Ernst Cassirer’s study of symbols. Tilman Lahme portrayed Golo Mann as an emigrant-remigrant. For Mann, the American exile was enriching but left him as unfulfilled as his brief return to Germany before he eventually settled in Switzerland. The public success of Mann’s works stood in stark contrast to his defeats in the realm of academic politics. The two commentators raised additional questions about what the experience of emigration and exile means for historical scholarship. Carola Dietze advocated an expansion of comparative perspectives, acknowledging the difficulties that the “second generation” faced in its acculturation to American culture. Georg Iggers compared this second cohort of émigrés to the first cohort and suggested putting more emphasis on critics of German imperialism like Georg Hallgarten.

The first day of this conference culminated in a round-table discussion. Moderator James Sheehan invited three “second generation” scholars — Hanna Holborn Gray, Peter Paret, and Fritz Stern — to share personal recollections with the audience and to comment on their sense of belonging (or not) to a particular cohort as well as on their relationship to Germany. Gray pointed out that there was, indeed, a social and intellectual network of émigrés, which she and her family were part of. These émigrés shared, however, a deep appreciation of American culture and the American model of the university. Peter Paret recalled his early life as a young emigrant, a US soldier in the South Pacific, a post-war visitor to Germany, and ultimately a doctoral student in England. Reviewing his own, diverse interests, Paret articulated his appreciation of a kind of historical writing, exemplified by Felix Gilbert, that allows room for a wide variety of topics. Fritz Stern emphasized that he never thought of himself as being in
exile but as having made a permanent move to the United States, especially since the American academic milieu was welcoming and enticing. Still, the transnational experience remained with him as he felt encouraged to enter the field of German history, which was only beginning to take shape in the 1950s.

On the second day of the conference, Gerhard A. Ritter introduced the conference’s fourth panel, which was devoted to comparative perspectives. Shulamit Volkov examined German émigré historians in Israel. Her portrayals of Richard Koebner at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem as well as of Walther Grab, Shlomo Na’aman, Charles Bloch, Yehuda Wallach, and Yaakov Touri at Tel Aviv University provided important insights into the ruptures and difficulties in the careers of these scholars and highlighted their transnational identities. Peter Alter brought in the British perspective. Those who came to Britain as trained scholars faced profound difficulties, as did slightly younger ones like Werner E. Mosse. Ultimately, those who were able to stay, according to Alter, make a difference in fueling an interest in Central European history among British students. Commentator Konrad Jarausch suggested examining what kind of cultural capital the emigrants brought with them, how they acculturated to American society, and to what extent they contributed to the professionalization of the study of central European history. In his comment, Frank Mecklenburg emphasized the role of networks and the institutional infrastructure used by the “second generation” outside universities, such as the Wiener Library and the Leo Baeck Institutes.

The last panel situated the “second generation” among various types of transatlantic conversations. Philipp Stelzel traced this generation’s ambivalent impact on historiography in Germany. In spite of the “non-reception” of Gay’s and Stern’s early works and persistent biases against emigrants among parts of the West German scholarly establishment, the émigrés were ultimately embraced for a variety of reasons — to buttress the agenda of the “critical” historical studies and to be cited as supposedly impartial arbiters. Volker Berghahn concluded the sequence of papers with some far-reaching suggestions about how to conceptualize the distinct experiences of both the first and the second generation of émigré historians. He suggested utilizing insights from the social sciences and anthropology and stressed the overlapping tasks of identifying communalities among the emigrants, understanding their socialization in the United States,
and realizing the limits to their assimilation. In her comment, Renate Bridenthal confirmed that, in her case, the feeling of being “somehow outside” never truly disappeared. She also encouraged the audience to pay more attention to the specific role women scholars played in articulating not only emigrant experiences but also larger questions of social identity that helped to renew history as a discipline. Gerhard Weinberg pointed to three additional dimensions of the conference’s theme: the necessity of gaining access to German sources after the end of World War II; the role that the German Studies Association played in fostering dialogue among historians of all generations; and the importance of having American works translated into German.

Hartmut Lehmann opened the final discussion by reading a statement prepared for this conference by Klemens von Klemperer. Klemperer recalled his personal process of acculturation in the United States and the relationship to older émigrés who often served as mentors. He underlined the keen interest he and his contemporaries took in facilitating a new transatlantic dialogue. The ensuing, lively discussion addressed, among other things, the relationship between social and cultural history and the political contexts that influenced the “second generation.” Many discussants articulated questions about the hybrid identities of many émigré historians and the influence (and limits thereof) of the émigrés’ works among succeeding generations of students. It therefore emerged that this conference marks a welcome beginning in the process of historicizing and contextualizing the oeuvres and experiences of the “second generation” of émigré scholars in all their diversity.

Andreas W. Daum (State University of New York at Buffalo)