DECADES OF RECONSTRUCTION: POSTWAR SOCIETIES, ECONOMIES, AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS FROM THE EIGHTEENTH TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Conference at the University of Toronto, May 3-4, 2013. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), New York, and the Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (CERES) in the Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto. Conveners: Ute Planert (University of Wuppertal / University of Toronto) and James Retallack (University of Toronto). Participants: Katherine Aaslestad (West Virginia University), Margaret Lavinia Anderson (University of California, Berkeley), Julia Angster (University of Mannheim), Robert Beachy (Goucher College), Doris Bergen (University of Toronto), Roger Chickering (Georgetown University), Christopher Clark (University of Cambridge), Jeremy DeWaal (Vanderbilt University), Jörg Echternkamp (Potsdam / University of Halle-Wittenberg), Sven Externbrink (University of Heidelberg / University of Innsbruck), Charles Ingrao (Purdue University), Jennifer L. Jenkins (University of Toronto), Eric T. Jennings (University of Toronto), Mark Jones (University College Dublin), Jesse Kauff man (Eastern Michigan University), Ulrike Kirchberger (University of Bayreuth), Jörn Leonhard (University of Freiburg / Harvard University), Kimberly Lowe (Yale University), Deborah Neill (York University), Simone Selva (GHI), James J. Sheehan (Stanford University), Adrian Shubert (York University), Reinhard Stauber (University of Klagenfurt), Elizabeth Vlossak (Brock University), Christopher Wilkins (William Jewell College).

This conference addressed the complex relationship between war and postwar, focusing on the conceptualization of periods of transition between wartime objectives and reconstruction efforts. In order to transcend national and chronological boundaries and to emphasize that post-1945 Europe was just one postwar era among many, this meeting examined the histories of war and postwar reconstruction in Europe and North America over a period of two centuries.

The discussions provided new insights on a wide range of issues. Many speakers discussed the difficulty of determining when wars begin or end, both for contemporaries and later scholars. Also addressed was how transnational and comparative perspectives reveal the complexity and variety of transitions from war to peace. Another theme was the interconnectedness between domestic politics, foreign policy, and economic concerns in postwar decades. The conference
also showed that a long time frame illuminates continuities and discontinuities in how wars are experienced, peace is negotiated, nations are conceived, and states are built. Longer chronological frameworks encourage new research into less well-researched periods of reconstruction, including those that followed the Seven Years War, the Napoleonic Wars, and the Austro-Prussian and Franco-German Wars.

After opening remarks and greetings from Werner Wnendt, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to Canada, and Randall Hansen, Director of the Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at the University of Toronto, the first session, which included a comment by Margaret Lavinia Anderson, explored postwar reconstruction in Central Europe between the ancien régime and the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Charles Ingrao delved into the actions of the Habsburg Monarchy after the Peace of Hubertusburg in 1763 and after 1815. The period following defeat in 1763 was characterized by Maria Theresa’s largely successful gradual reforms, whereas political inertia reasserted itself after victory over Napoleon. Robert Beachy discussed Saxony’s Rétablissement after 1763 and the efforts of Thomas von Fritsch to restore fiscal order to Saxony’s prostrate economy. He argued that 1763 marked a break with the excesses of Saxony’s self-styled absolutist rulers. Christopher Clark used three moments in Prussian history to compare continuities and discontinuities in prewar, wartime, and postwar settings. He warned against understanding war exclusively as a driver of change and creativity. Wars, he argued, do not determine the character of reform; they merely provide the occasion or opportunity for reforms that might otherwise be implemented in peacetime. Katherine Aaslestad made a case for understanding the years between 1814 and 1830 as a postwar period. Focusing on the Hanseatic cities, she argued that civilian relief organizations and military authorities renegotiated stability and security through public discussion and commemoration. In the subsequent discussion, it became apparent that reconstruction often depended on what group or organization would provide security for cities in Central Europe: the German Confederation or city fathers themselves? Discussion also arose on the issue of later weakness or dissolution being projected onto earlier periods and Ingrao wondered why “Austria wins the war and loses the narrative.”

The second session, which featured a comment by Ute Planert, illuminated the outlook of Great Britain and France as colonial powers
but added a novel North American perspective. The session began with Julia Angster’s study of Britain’s relationship with the rest of the world after the Seven Years War. Changes wrought by that war allowed the British to become global naval masters, not through military means but through something less tangible — a global maritime space regulated by a British legal and economic order. Ulrike Kirchberger’s paper questioned the view of 1763 as a major break in Anglo-American history that introduced a “globalizing decade.” By turning her attention to Native Americans, she demonstrated that alleged turning points and the conclusion of peace were understood very differently by different groups at the time. Sven Externbrink argued that the Seven Years War was a truly global war. His paper focused on France after its defeat in 1763 and outlined the many reform efforts it undertook before it re-entered the stage in the American War of Independence. Reinhard Stauber examined the high diplomacy of the Congress of Vienna, illustrating how the Congress was a turning point in European history.

The third session, for which Roger Chickering provided a comment, ranged from the 1860s to the 1940s and focused on civil wars and humanitarian assistance. Christopher Wilkins challenged traditional explanations of American efforts after the Civil War to acquire Caribbean territory. Wilkins argued that American advocates of expansion sought to incorporate the Caribbean islands as states, not colonies: Reconstruction served as the ideological prism through which this project was seen. In her paper on postwar reconstruction in Alsace-Lorraine in the 1870s, Elizabeth Vlossak examined the resettlement of populations, the reconfiguration of geographic borders, and the reassertion of traditional gender roles. She questioned the degree to which France’s decade of reconstruction was characterized by the nature of its defeat: certain features of the reconstruction were the result of modern war more generally. Kimberly Lowe’s paper on international humanitarian assistance after the First World War examined the actions of the International Red Cross, the League of Nations, and other humanitarian assistance regimes. She demonstrated the extent to which nineteenth-century traditions of sympathy for wounded soldiers remained the predominant framework in which international humanitarian action took place in the postwar period. That framework proved catastrophic for European Jews, who did not fit within this convention and were denied such assistance. Adrian Shubert outlined Franco’s reconstruction efforts after the Spanish Civil War, drawing attention to the many ways in which the Spanish case
is exceptional. He characterized reconstruction there as a “comprehensive vision for change” that included political, economic, social, and cultural elements and was imposed with violence.

James J. Sheehan provided the keynote address on Friday evening. Sheehan discussed five postwar periods, those following the Seven Years War, the Napoleonic Wars, the Franco-Prussian War, and the two world wars of the twentieth century. In his wide-ranging analysis, he explored the turning points that characterized each postwar era and the kinds of postwar orders that were established — or at least seeded — in those decades. Of these five periods, Sheehan expressed skepticism as to whether the wars of the 1860s and 1870s had as fundamental an influence on the following decades as historians have ascribed to them, especially when they are viewed from social, political, and geo-strategic perspectives.

The fourth session, which included a comment by Doris Bergen, opened with Jesse Kauffman’s examination of German occupation policies in Poland during the First World War. The Germans who administered the occupation were primarily concerned with establishing a postwar Polish satellite state; such a state, they hoped, might counterbalance future Russian military strength. Mark Jones shifted attention to the still under-researched German Revolution of 1918–19. Although militarily defeated, Germany was not among the “shatter-zones” in eastern and southeastern Europe after 1918. Nevertheless, the perceived threat of political revolution resulted in state-supported “performance violence.” Two papers then examined German reconstruction in the aftermath of the Second World War. Jörg Echternkamp proposed a rethinking of the chronological demarcation between wartime and peacetime. The final months of the Second World War were more significant for the transformation of attitudes among the German civilian population than historians have tended to believe. Jeremy DeWaal considered the renegotiation between national, regional, and local identities in a single West German city after 1945. Even though the city of Cologne was almost completely destroyed, its citizens embraced policies of reconstruction that highlighted local traditions: they transformed the rebuilt urban spaces into a “world-open bridge” to Western Europe and a symbol of democracy and tolerance.

The fifth session focused on the economic and political consequences of the two world wars from an international angle. Jörn Leonhard challenged the traditional views of the First World War’s aftermath.
He questioned the orthodoxy that the Treaty of Versailles represented a rupture with the international system of the nineteenth century and, in the process, transformed antiquated multinational empires into modern nation states. Instead, Leonhard argued, international relations after 1918 reflected both continuities and discontinuities, including new ways in which the pursuit of national self-determination resulted in ethnic violence. Focusing on French Equatorial Africa and Cameroon, Eric Jennings examined the colonial contribution to the French war effort during and following the Second World War. Although the decisions made at the Brazzaville Conference in January 1944 dramatically transformed official attitudes toward forced labor and trade unions, colonial reform produced violent responses from French settlers. Postwar interpretations of metropolitan resistance and of African sacrifice were also bitterly contested. Lastly, Simone Selva examined American efforts to stabilize Western European economies and the encouragement of European domestic manufacturing through large American armament orders. These, he argued, were intended not only to stimulate international trade between the United States and Europe but also to buttress Western European defense capabilities in the early Cold War period.

The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion launched by Retallack, Aaslestad, Chickering, Leonhard, and Sheehan. The five participants agreed on the difficulty of defining postwar periods precisely, with questions about when a war ends, when a postwar begins, and which events, attitudes, and trends should be considered significant in helping answer the first two questions. They noted that different groups of people, particularly when considered in a global perspective, have different ways of defining war. First Nations peoples in North America or natives in European colonies were in a continual war with the colonizers, without their conflicts being characterized as times of war. The Great Powers pressed their own interests when they defined colonial, continental, or civil conflicts as wars or as something else. In Eastern Europe after 1918, wars continued for years, despite official pronouncements that they were over. The panelists and the audience reiterated a point that was raised often over the two days: Victory or defeat in a war has a tremendous influence on the politics of reform and the commemoration of war after peace returns. Yet the list of common characteristics shared by all victories or all defeats is not as long as scholars sometimes imagine. As the discussion expanded, it became clearer that it is not the “objective” situation of war on which current and future research will focus. Instead, scholars
will explore the experience of war, the multiple interpretations of war’s consequences — beneficial or “unnatural,” legitimizing or destabilizing — and the continual reshaping of those interpretations up to the present day.

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