NINETEENTH TRANSATLANTIC DOCTORAL SEMINAR
TWENTIETH-CENTURY GERMAN HISTORY

Seminar at the Historisches Kolleg, Munich, May 29-June 1, 2013. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington and the BMW Center for German and European Studies, Georgetown University, in cooperation with the Historisches Seminar, Ludwig Maximilian University Munich. Conveners: Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown University), Margit Szöllösi-Janze (LMU), and Richard F. Wetzell (GHI). Faculty Mentors: Stefan Berger (Ruhr University Bochum), Roger Chickering (Georgetown University), Mark Roseman (Indiana University, Bloomington), Christina von Hodenberg (Queen Mary, University of London). Participants: Deborah Barton (University of Toronto), Marcus Böck (Ruhr University Bochum), Thomas Brodie (Hertford College), Jeremy DeWaal (Vanderbilt University), Sarah Ehlers (Humboldt University of Berlin), Kristen Ehrenberger (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Kate Horning (Cornell University), Bradley J. Nichols (University of Tennessee, Knoxville), Ned Richardson-Little (University of Pennsylvania), Dominique Schröder (University of Bielefeld), Peter Stadlbauer (University of Vienna), Janosch Steuwer (Ruhr University Bochum), Kira Thurman (University of Rochester), Minu Haschemi Yekani (European University Institute, Florence).

The nineteenth Transatlantic Seminar brought together sixteen doctoral students working on dissertations in twentieth-century German history at universities in North America and Europe. The seminar was organized in eight panels, featuring two papers each, which opened with two comments by fellow students, followed by discussion of the pre-circulated papers.

The first panel featured two papers that placed German history in a transnational perspective. Sarah Ehlers’s paper “Kolonialmedizin ohne Kolonien: Deutsche Schlafkrankheitsforschung zwischen internationalen Netzwerken und nationaler Politik nach 1919” examined German research on “sleeping sickness” after Germany’s loss of its colonial possessions. Ehlers showed that the development of the first effective medication against this disease by German medical researchers during the 1920s was the product of the international networks of former colonial doctors and, at the same time, of revanchist aspirations to regain Germany’s former colonies. Kira Thurman’s paper “Black Classical Musicians in East Germany,
1945-1961” investigated the role African American musicians played in East German cultural life between 1945 and 1961. Thurman argued that East German depictions of African American musicians Aubrey Pankey and Paul Robeson conformed to larger political and cultural definitions of African American culture and German musical identity in the German Democratic Republic.

The second panel explored two sets of autobiographical writings in Nazi Germany. In his paper “Positionsbestimmungen: Die Suche nach dem eigenen Verhältnis zum Nationalsozialismus 1933/34,” Janosch Steuwer presented an analysis of diaries written during the first two years of the Nazi regime. The widespread interpretation of the Nazi seizure of power as a “nationale Erhebung,” he argued, compelled diary writers to assess their own relationship to the new regime and to reconcile their current political position with their pre-1933 political opinions and behavior. Challenging the notion that the Holocaust is beyond representation, Dominique Schröder’s paper “Tagebuchschreiben in Nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern, 1939-1945” examined the diaries of Jewish and political prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. Disagreeing with Wolfgang Sofsky’s thesis that the external environment became irrelevant to concentration camp life, Schröder argued that spaces outside the camps played a significant role in these diaries.

The third panel dealt with the transition from wartime Nazi Germany to the early postwar era. Deborah Barton’s paper “The Elasticity of Politics, ‘Soft’ News and the Utilization of Women Journalists: Ursula von Kardorff 1937-1962” explored a female journalist’s ability to command a public voice during the Third Reich and her postwar role in promoting narratives of German victimization as well as reflection on Nazi crimes through her personal and professional writing. Jeremy DeWaal’s paper “Heimat in the Rubble: Turning to Local Worlds, from the Rhine to the Elbe, 1945-1960” argued that postwar Heimat enthusiasts reconfigured local historical memory in order to forge identification with the postwar goal of creating a new democracy. While border areas formerly saw themselves as national fortresses, after 1945 localities like Cologne and Hamburg shifted to understanding themselves as “world-open bridges.”

The fourth panel began with Minu Haschemi Yekani’s paper “Globale Mobilität und die ‘Gelbe Gefahr,’” which examined the recruitment and deployment of indentured laborers from East Asia (“Kulis”) in the German colony of Deutsch-Ostafrika. Paying attention to global
effects in local contexts, the paper argued that the colony’s labor regime and conceptions of race were strongly shaped by global processes of migration and transformation. Kristen Ehrenberger’s paper “The Politics of the Table: Massenspeisung and the Familientisch” examined food rationing and the establishment of communal kitchens in Saxony during the First World War. Introducing the concept of the “telescopic perspective,” which links the biochemistry of nutrition from the molecular level through the individual and family levels to the national Volkskörper, Ehrenberger argued that the communal kitchens challenged traditional notions of the role of the family.

The fifth panel explored different aspects of popular support for the Nazi regime and its policies in wartime Nazi Germany. Bradley J. Nichols’s paper “Housemaids, Renegades, and Race Experts: Nazi Re-Germanization Policy and the Recruitment of Polish Domestic Servant Girls” examined a Nazi program designed to assimilate Polish girls into the German national community by sending them to live with families in Germany. According to Nichols, the German population’s mostly negative reaction to these girls should be interpreted as evidence that popular conceptions of the Volksgemeinschaft reflected long-standing ethnic-nationalist stereotypes rather than Nazi racial categories. Thomas Brodie’s paper “German Catholicism and the Second World War” presented two regional case studies that highlighted social and political divisions within the Catholic community in wartime Nazi Germany. Most Catholics, Brodie argued, found it much easier to reconcile their Catholic religious and German national identities than has often been assumed.

The sixth panel dealt with postwar West German history. Kate Horning’s paper “An Emergency Law Fit for a Rechtsstaat?” examined emergency legislation in the Federal Republic of Germany. Juxtaposing the emergency measures passed legislated in 1968 with the laws passed to prosecute the Red Army Faction in the 1970s, she argued that the measures taken when West Germany found itself confronted with terrorists in the 1970s were more drastic than the limits the state had imagined for itself during the 1960s. Unfortunately, the author of the second paper planned for this panel, Michael Vössing, was unable to attend.

The seventh panel was dedicated to German Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coming to terms with the past) after 1945. Jennifer Rodgers’s paper “Transforming the ‘Leviathan Index’: West German Public Diplomacy and the International Tracing Service in the Early
Adenauer Era” examined the ways in which the Federal Republic used the International Tracing Service, an agency established by the Allies to locate victims of the Second World War, to rehabilitate its image abroad during the early postwar and Adenauer eras. Bonn, she argued, hoped that participation in the agency’s humanitarian operations would demonstrate atonement and thus help to normalize foreign relations. Peter Stadlbauer’s paper “‘Saubere Wehrmacht’ gegen ‘schmutzige SS’? Zur Karriere und strafrechtlichen Verfolgung von Eichmanns Chef Erich Ehrlinger” investigated the political career and postwar prosecution of the high-ranking SS officer Erich Ehrlinger, arguing that the failure of West German attempts to prosecute him was due to the combination of three factors: the phenomenon of “medical amnesty,” a powerful network of former Nazis, and the postwar myth of a neat distinction between the “clean Wehrmacht” and the “dirty SS.”

The eighth and final panel focused on East Germany and the process of German unification. In his paper “Self-Determination, Post-Colonialism and Socialism: Human Rights in East Germany from a Transnational Perspective” Ned Richardson-Little argued that in the 1960s the SED developed a conception of socialist human rights that was closely connected to self-determination and non-interference. Therefore, when the international discourse of human rights shifted from ideas of self-determination towards individual liberties in the 1970s, the SED faced significant threats to its legitimacy from within the GDR and from abroad. In his paper “Wirtschaftsexperten in der Arena des Übergangs: Die Mitarbeiter/innen der Treuhandanstalt in den ökonomischen, kulturellen, und gesellschaftlichen Transformationsprozessen, 1990-1994” Marcus Böick focused on the initial process of policy planning in the Bonn ministerial bureaucracy in the spring of 1990, arguing that much of the subsequent history of the Treuhand must be understood in light of the fact that the West Germans quickly settled on a policy model that was based on the success story of the West German currency reform of 1948.

During the final discussion participants reflected on the topics and themes that were prominent at the seminar and those that were not, even though it must be borne in mind that the papers presented here do not necessarily reflect current trends among all dissertations on German history. While there was only one paper each on the First World War and the Weimar Republic, the Nazi era was strongly represented; half the papers covered the post-1945 period, with
papers on the FRG slightly outnumbering those on the GDR. Roughly a third of the papers used biographical approaches. While some noted the absence of classic political history, some authors explained that they saw their work as “politische Kulturgeschichte.” Looking back over the almost twenty-year history of the seminar, Roger Chickering commented on the methodological convergence of historical research on both sides of the Atlantic toward cultural history. While the cultural turn was noticeable in the growing attention to language and discourse, it was also noted that many projects were concerned with recovering individual agency, which led to a discussion about whether agency should be seen as an ideological notion and whether we need new, more systematic approaches to historical subjectivities. The completion of the doctoral dissertations presented at this stimulating and congenial seminar is eagerly awaited.

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