TWENTIETH TRANSATLANTIC DOCTORAL SEMINAR
NINETEENTH-CENTURY GERMAN HISTORY

Seminar at the GHI Washington, May 7-10, 2014, co-sponsored by the GHI and the BMW Center for European Studies at Georgetown University. Conveners: Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown University) and Richard F. Wetzell (GHI). Faculty Mentors: Celia Applegate (Vanderbilt University), David Barclay (Kalamazoo College), Johannes Paulmann (Leibniz-Institut für Europäische Geschichte, Mainz), Ute Planert (University of Wuppertal). Doctoral participants: Norman Aselmeyer (Free University of Berlin), Joshua Bennett (University of Oxford), Scott Berg (Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge), Adam Blackler (University of Minnesota), Skye Doney (University of Wisconsin, Madison), Marc Hanisch (University of Duisburg-Essen), Tina Hannappel (Max-Planck-Institut für Europäische Rechtsgeschichte, Frankfurt/M), Carla Heelan (Harvard University), Christoph Kienemann (University of Oldenburg), Daniel Ristau (University of Leipzig), Katharina Steiner (University of Zürich), Matthew Unangst (Temple University), Marshall Yokell (Texas A&M University), Matthew Yokell (Texas A&M University).

The first panel, which included comments by Skye Doney and Katharina Steiner, explored processes of identity formation in nineteenth century Germany. Adam Blackler focused on how colonial encounters in German Southwest Africa influenced German conceptions of citizenship and Heimat, culminating in the prevalence of “racial thinking” by the early twentieth century. Prior to this point, however, settlers’ ideas of colonial identity and nationality had been much more fluid and far less exclusionary. As Blacker showed, mixed marriages between settlers and indigenous women were relatively common. Once race emerged as the central category of national belonging, bringing more white women to the colony became a key aim of the Imperial German government. Daniel Ristau’s paper honed in on “Jewishness” — which the author explicitly understands as a constructed and contingent category — as a resource of identity formation. Ristau’s dissertation project, which takes its cues from newer, transnationally-orientated cultural historical approaches and seeks to overcome the binary readings of “Germanness” and “Jewishness” that informed an older literature on nineteenth century Germany, is a micro history of the far-reaching familial network of the Bondi family (1790-1870). Both papers emphasized the fluidity of German identity
formation in a period when race-based definitions of inclusion and exclusion had not yet taken center stage.

The second panel, whose papers were introduced by Norman Aselmeyer and Christoph Kienemann, focused on the role of religion in nineteenth-century Europe. Scott Berg shared his thoughts on the Catholic revival in the Habsburg Empire of the 1830s and 1840s. He sought to understand why the Habsburg state, which had been loyal to Catholicism prior to the reforms of Joseph II, eschewed the use of confessional politics and did not participate in the Catholic resurgence before 1848, which put it in a somewhat unique position in Europe — particularly in contrast to Prussia, which actively embraced its identity as a Protestant state in the same period. Joshua Bennett’s contribution was an intellectual history of how nineteenth century British religious historians engaged with different strands of German historical criticism. He showed that the creative adaptation of German historical philosophy was crucial to how distinctive liberal religious discourses were articulated in Britain. Their reliance on German debates helped British intellectuals to overcome the religious typologies of the evangelical revival and to answer materialist conceptions of human experience. Both papers touched on the legacies of the Enlightenment for religious actors — what Bennett termed “the most modern of phenomena: anti-modern religious reaction.” This opened up larger questions about the secularization of European states in the nineteenth century and the extent to which it was fruitful — as much of the recent literature on this controversial paradigm suggests — to distinguish more clearly between organized religion and popular forms of religiosity.

The papers of the third panel, introduced by Marshall Yokell and Carla Heelan, both took space as their central category of analysis. Marc Hanisch offered a long-term overview of how German spatial conceptions of the “Orient” (or “Nahost”) evolved and changed within the Auswärtiges Amt from the late nineteenth century onwards. One emphasis of the paper was to tease out the continuities in terms of personnel within the German Foreign Service. Without tracing a direct path from “Windhoek to Auschwitz,” Hanisch showed that some of the same “Orient experts” shaped Germany’s policy in the broader region from the Imperial period into the Bonn Republic. Matthew Unangst analyzed how ideas about space and race entered colonial practice in German East Africa. Taking the “twin crises” of the Bushiri War and the deteriorating position of Emin Pasha in
the late 1880s as his starting point, Unangst argued that German colonial fantasies increasingly began to clash with the reality on the ground. At this point, African actors challenged German control for the first time, leading to increasing efforts to strengthen German rule from the top down, which would ultimately transform the German colonial project. The wide-ranging discussion touched on the place of imperialism within German history on the one hand and the place of Germany within newer histories of imperialism on the other.

The first panel on Friday, introduced by Daniel Ristau and Matthew Yokell, shed light on the varied forms responses to modernity took in nineteenth-century Germany. Norman Aselmeyer explored the “ills” of modernity through representations of health and disease from 1850 onwards. Based on a close reading of a range of workers’ autobiographies, he examined the intricacies of German medical culture in the period up to 1918. Aselmeyer detected a shift toward individual and collective understandings of illness as closely tied to the working conditions under industrial capitalism. Carla Heelan looked at the spread and transformation of “medievalism” in Germany between 1806 and 1914. Nineteenth-century German intellectuals developed a keen interest in the Middle Ages, and “medievalism” could serve competing interests. Heelan honed in on the Rhenish Catholic architectural philosopher August Reichensperger to show that his identitarian politics relied upon an idealized medieval society whose holism he believed to be articulated in medieval Gothic architecture. Reichensperger was not just nostalgic about the past, however, but modeled a program for modern social and religious renewal upon medieval aesthetics. The discussion of these ambitious and wide-ranging papers centered on questions of manageability and the selection of sources.

Friday’s second panel, with comments from Joshua Bennett and Adam Blackler, teased out the importance of increasingly globalized social networks in nineteenth century German history. Tina Hannappel examined transnational criminal justice regimes in Europe between 1871 and 1914. Assassinations and assassination attempts that often targeted European monarchs were on the rise in the last decades of the nineteenth century, forcing Europeans to deal with the phenomenon of anarchism across national borders. At the 1898 anti-anarchist conference in Rome, however, anarchism was deliberately not defined as a political crime to avoid related claims to asylum by the perpetrators. Marshall Yokell turned to German policy in Latin
America in the same period, specifically to the German military mission in Chile and its effect on the German arms industry. Yokell demonstrated that the Chilean army was successively “Prussianized”; weaponry, uniforms, and rituals were exported to the country. The primary purpose of this “Prussianization” seems to have been establishing a sustainable export market for German manufacturers in Latin America. The discussion focused on the tensions between different German actors abroad, the role of the state in transnational networks, and definitions of “globalization” vs. “informal Empire.”

Saturday’s first panel, on which Marc Hanisch and Scott Berg served as commentators, touched on a number of different themes, including travel and pilgrimage, materiality, and representations of modernity in the nineteenth century. Skye Doney’s paper focused on the 1840s Trier Controversy, which dealt with the role of superstition and fanaticism in German Catholicism. Based on a close investigation of the writings of the Silesian priest Johannes Ronge and their impact, Doney demonstrated that the clergy and laity followed diverging trajectories from the 1840s onward. While there was a huge rise in the number of pilgrims who came to Trier to venerate the Holy Coat of Jesus, which they continued to regard as a vessel of divine presence, Catholic clergy increasingly turned to scientific methods to provide evidence of the relics’ authenticity. Katharina Steiner’s paper took the audience to the Naples of the early 1890s where Wilhelm Giesbrecht, a zoologist and amateur photographer, took thousands of photographs of the city that diverged from the well-known visual canon of the period. Eschewing pictures of the city’s architectural attractions, Giesbrecht turned the eye of his camera on his day-to-day surroundings. Steiner’s study seeks to combine approaches from the recent “visual turn” in German historiography and the history of science, which increasingly looks at the media of scientific documentation.

The papers of the seminar’s final panel, introduced by Tina Hannappel and Matthew Unangst, returned to colonial history. Christoph Kienemann explored the connections between German colonial policy in Africa and German perceptions and imaginations of Eastern Europe between 1871 and 1914. Based on scientific works on Eastern Europe from the field of geography and related disciplines, Kienemann sought to show that these relied heavily on colonial tropes. Matthew Yokell took the seminar further eastward, to the German colony of Tsingtau. He traced how the vision for a “German Hong Kong” evolved from 1880 to 1918. Building on Paul Kennedy’s recent work,
Yokell paid close attention to the “middle people.” He examined conflicts between naval and merchant interests, debates over schooling and the creation of a Chinese colonial elite. The discussion raised questions regarding the definition of relationships as “colonial” and returned to earlier debates about the place of the colonies in Germany’s nineteenth century.

During the concluding discussion, participants reflected on how they had come to their topics and what their choices said about the state of research on nineteenth-century German history. Central themes of this year’s seminar were Empire, religion, and spatial history. By contrast, many of the classic turning points of the century (notably 1848) and key figures (Bismarck) were by and large absent. This reflected a certain “presentism” of historical research — the role of Empire and globalization as well as religious conflict being important present-day concerns.

Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown University)