STUDYING THE HISTORY OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM AND THE HOLOCAUST: TOWARD AN AGENDA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Conference at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and at the German Historical Institute, Washington DC, January 23-24, 2014. Conveners: Stefan Hördler (GHI) and Leah Wolfson (USHMM). Participants: Natalia Aleksiun (Touro College), Frank Bajohr (Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich / Center for Holocaust Studies), Hartmut Berghoff (GHI), Richard Breitman (American University), Michael Brenner (American University), Christopher Browning (University of North Carolina), Anna Cichopec-Gajraj (Arizona State University), Wendy Lower (Claremont McKenna College), Jürgen Matthäus (USHMM), Mark Roseman (Indiana University), Jonas Scherner (NTNU Trondheim), Paul Shapiro (USHMM), Sybille Steinbacher (University of Vienna), Michael Wildt (Humboldt University Berlin), and Andreas Wirsching (Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich).

Research on the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust has spawned an ever-increasing variety of new studies. It was the goal of this conference to discuss current and future directions, topics, and methods relevant to studying the Holocaust and the Nazi era, including: economic and social history; the history of everyday life; the impact of ideology, racism, and gender; perpetrators, society, and Europe in a cross-border context; as well as the postwar legacies of Nazism and the Holocaust. The program brought together a diverse group of approximately twenty scholars from the United States and Europe, including representatives of the GHI and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Presentations by senior and mid-career scholars in a series of panels and roundtable discussions culminated in a roundtable presentation that was open to the general public.

The conference convened at the USHMM on the first day. In his opening comments, Paul Shapiro emphasized the international and interdisciplinary character of the field, contrasted the numerous research questions with the nearly unmanageable body of sources, and called attention to the restrictions on access to sources in the European Union.

The first panel, “The Economic and Social History of National Socialism,” began with Frank Bajohr and Jonas Scherner, whose presentations featured different approaches. Bajohr argued that recent
research had given rise to a new assessment of entrepreneurs’ intentions and individual room for maneuver in the Nazi era. Numerous case studies on the history of various companies, he noted, have provided new insights into the Nazi economic system, including the question of political and economic priorities and interests. The value of ongoing studies also lies in the analysis of social practices in the interactive field of economy and society. Economic reasoning and doctrine derived from people’s worldview explain dynamics within the Volksgemeinschaft, from the “Aryanization” of companies classified as Jewish to plunder and genocide. Bajohr saw deficits primarily in transnational research and the European dimensions of profit and profiteers, confiscation, and restitution.

Schermer highlighted the use of combined macro- and micro-studies, which have enabled a better understanding of the economic order of National Socialism. He emphasized four points: First, there are still significant gaps in the study of the macroeconomic contexts of the Nazi war economy; the apparent “production miracle” of the Nazi era, in particular, needs to be critically examined using reliable quantitative data. The gaps in the historiography are related to a lack of reliable data. Secondly, an assessment of the German war economy in terms of its success or failure can only be arrived at by comparing the German war economy with other war economies during the Second World War. Third, the debate over the “room-for-maneuver” available to businessmen in the Nazi period requires further comparative studies. Fourth, there are still large gaps in the historical research on the Nazi economic exploitation of occupied countries during the war.

In his comment, Hartmut Berghoff largely agreed with both presentations and noted two major gaps in recent research: archives at foreign companies are still sealed and not accessible, and there are many blank spots in the research on German occupied countries. Moreover, there is still a need to focus more on the business practices, rather than the political affiliation, of German companies. Moreover: where are the stories of Nazi-era businessmen who were unsuccessful? The criminal practices and non-compliance of companies could also be promising topics, and white-collar crime needs further examination. The ensuing discussion of the papers generated a differentiated understanding of the concepts of perpetrator and bystander and an expansion of the categories of “parasite vs. profiteer.” In addition, the discussion problematized the relationship between pragmatism and ideology.
The second panel, on “History of Everyday Life,” featured papers by Natalia Aleksiun and Mark Roseman. Focusing on Jewish everyday life, Aleksiun advocated a shift in perspective so that Jews are no longer only viewed as persecuted persons from the perspective of Nazi sources but rather, drawing on Jewish sources, as an active community. Such an approach would restore Jews to the status of subjects rather than objects of scholarly study. It would also mean turning to microhistory and integrative perspectives. Seemingly trivial aspects of daily life like eating and sleeping, she argued, can provide new insights into the structures and routines of everyday life, in which regional, temporal, social, and gender differences play decisive roles.

In his paper, Mark Roseman argued for critical reflection on the concept of everyday life and called for making a distinction between “ordinary” everyday life and the extraordinary, exceptional everyday life of the Holocaust experience. From the vantage point of the former, the Holocaust is barely comprehensible; the latter was what living in the Holocaust was like. The concept of *Alltagsgeschichte*, Roseman argued, denotes three interlinked agendas: a locus of inquiry, a method or set of assumptions that structure that inquiry, and a mission that drives it. None of these translate easily into the Holocaust context. “Everyday history” is very much a part of social history and reflects the cultural turn of the 1980s. “Everyday” is especially interesting because the “everyday” changed so drastically in the prewar period. Everyday history should be about reclaiming history from memory, and it should also focus on the history of emotion.

In her commentary, Leah Wolfson emphasized that the sources themselves are responsible for the sharply varying impressions and interpretations of the “everyday.” In addition, depending on the time and place, it is unclear what a or the everyday really was. The discussion that followed focused on the problem areas of collective vs. collected memory, “constructed memory,” and the relationship between individual and collective daily life. In order for a history of emotion to contribute to resolving these issues, it would be necessary to apply an interdisciplinary expansion of methods for which historiography lacks appropriate means.

On the second day, the conference continued at the German Historical Institute. Wendy Lower opened the third panel on the “Impact of Ideology, Racism, and Gender” by calling for a differentiation of perpetrator categories based on gender. The various roles performed by women during the Nazi period — as wives, nurses, or camp guards,
for example — as well as the degree to which women identified with the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Lower argued, deserve greater consideration within the analysis of perpetrator testimonies. Lower also problematized the question of specific masculine and feminine forms of violence and advocated a differentiated discussion about the concept of “gendered violence” in the context of violence studies that would also address the period after 1945.

In the panel’s second paper, Sybille Steinbacher emphasized the need to make women visible as active agents with important functions within the power structures of the system. Established research questions on National Socialist ideology and racism should be reconfigured to include the category of gender and expanded to encompass a gender history of persecution. In addition to focusing more on the participation of women in violent crimes, especially in the occupied Eastern territories, and the interaction between female victims and female perpetrators during the war years, research needs to examine the way the justice system handled these issues after the war. In this context, special emphasis should be accorded to the discourse of innocence as it figured in the identity construction of the accused female perpetrators and in the latter’s perception by other subjects.

In his comment Richard Breitman welcomed the turn to previously neglected research areas, although he added critically that the productivity of the research question depends to a great extent on the availability of sources. The historical discipline should not close itself off from dialogue with the general public, Breitman advised, but rather follow the path opened up by Lower and Steinbacher.

The fourth panel addressed the topic of “Perpetrators, Society, and Europe in a Cross-Border Context.” In the first paper, Christopher Browning argued that perpetrator categories ought to convey causal relations as well as the diversity of historical experience in a nuanced way. Alongside German perpetrators, the Nazis also mobilized ethnic Germans and Eastern Europeans, who acquired power and status in an unsystematic, unorganized manner, thereby eventually profiting from the Holocaust. Browning concluded by questioning whether the KGB files were valid sources for a reassessment of perpetrator classifications and called for stronger ties between Holocaust and genocide research because the Holocaust and other genocides have two things in common: the dehumanization of the victims and the perpetrators’ drive to conform within their peer group.
In the panel’s second paper, Michael Wildt noted the far-reaching effects that the opening of Eastern European archives has had on research, expanding perspectives on the “middle men” of the Holocaust and fostering the turn away from the longstanding fixation on the final solution. He questioned the applicability of the definition of genocide set forth in the Genocide Convention in the 1990s to the Holocaust, because the Holocaust was not only willed by the state but also rooted in society and in social practice. According to Wildt, three new research approaches to perpetrator studies hold particular promise: First, the opening up of the triad of perpetrator — follower — victim in consideration of the complexity and mutual penetration of the categories; second, embedding the Holocaust in the history of violence of the twentieth century in the regional context of the “bloodlands”; and, third, a systematic comparison of the Holocaust with other genocides.

In his comment on this panel, Stefan Hördler took up a central theme of the previous discussions by interpreting the opening of the archives in the East as an opportunity, emphasizing the value of visual materials for analyzing perpetrators’ motives and networks. He also argued that in refining and revising perpetrator categories historians need to pay attention to gray areas and inconsistencies. Hördler thus argued for a dynamic conception of perpetrator typology, which is necessary in view of the study of perpetrators’ motives.

The fifth panel, “The Postwar Legacy of National Socialism and the Holocaust,” turned to the postwar period. In the first paper, Anna Cichopek-Gajraj stressed that Jewish life in Eastern Europe did not come to an end with the Holocaust. Yet the research literature on the period between the 1950s and 1990s does not appropriately reflect this circumstance. The postwar identities of Jewish survivors in Poland must be given greater attention by means of a stronger turn to local and comparative approaches on the contingency of their experience. Three aspects warrant particular attention in researching the postwar period: the coexistence of Jewish and non-Jewish people in everyday life, the assimilation of women, and the meaning of concepts of identity as a “survivor.”

In the following paper, Andreas Wirsching posed the question of the extent to which the popularity of presenting the Holocaust as a metaphor for “evil” contains the danger of reducing the Holocaust to a projection screen for empty and unreflected memorializing. Outdated approaches to explaining the Holocaust are thus presently experiencing
a revival in the public’s collective memory, a revival fostered by the internationalization and universalization of the Holocaust. Wirsching warned that this discrepancy between the historiographical treatment of the Holocaust and public historical consciousness could grow. He closed by calling for more critical attention to the problems of “commissioned research” on the history of companies, agencies, and ministries during the Nazi era.

In his commentary, Michael Brenner examined the dichotomy between historiography and discourses of collective memory; he also problematized the “survivor” concept. In postwar Poland, a comparatively high number of Jewish communities existed, but the history of victimization and the history of the contributions of these survivors, particularly in the 1950s, remain to be adequately addressed. Agreeing with Wirsching, Brenner also criticized commissioned research for its potential lack of innovation and transparency.

The concluding presentation, which featured Frank Bajohr, Christopher Browning, and Wendy Lower, presented the central insights of the conference to a broader public and highlighted the issue of access to sources on both sides of the Atlantic.

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