21ST TRANSATLANTIC DOCTORAL SEMINAR: TWENTIETH-CENTURY GERMAN HISTORY

Seminar at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, May 27–May 30, 2015. Co-organized by the German Historical Institute Washington and the BMW Center for German and European Studies, Georgetown University, in cooperation with the Historisches Seminar of the Humboldt Universität. Conveners: Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown University), Richard F. Wetzell (GHI Washington), and Michael Wildt (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin). Faculty Mentors: Donna Harsch (Carnegie Mellon University), Elizabeth Harvey (University of Nottingham), Paul Nolte (Freie Universität Berlin), and S. Jonathan Wiesen (Southern Illinois University). Participants: Maria Birger (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin), Mikkel Dack (University of Calgary), Elsa Duval (Leibniz Institut für Europäische Geschichte, Mainz), Stefanie Eisenhut (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin), Jane Freeland (Carlton University, Ottawa), Michael Geheran (Clark University, Worcester), Kerstin Hofmann (Universität Mannheim), Scott Krause (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Ines Langelüddeke (Universität Hamburg), Aline-Florence Manent (Harvard University), Darren O’Byrne (Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University), Sonja Ostrow (Vanderbilt University), Lisa Renken (Queen Mary, University of London), Briana Smith (University of Iowa), Hagen Stöckmann (Georg-August Universität Göttingen), Lauren Stokes (University of Chicago).

The twenty-first Transatlantic Doctoral Seminar in German History, co-organized by the German Historical Institute Washington and the BMW Center for German and European Studies at Georgetown University, was dedicated to twentieth-century German history and was generously hosted by Michael Wildt at the Humboldt University in Berlin. As always, the seminar brought together eight doctoral students from North America and eight from Europe, all whom are working on dissertations in German history. The seminar was organized in eight panels, featuring two papers each, which opened with two comments by fellow students, followed by discussion of the precirculated papers. Meeting in a beautiful conference room at the heart of the old Hauptgebäude of the Humboldt University on Unter den Linden, the seminar was characterized by a perfect combination of intellectual rigor and a spirit of collegiality.

The first panel featured two papers on Nazi Germany. Michael Geheran’s paper “The Limits of Military Sacrifice: Jewish Frontkämpfer
in the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft” examined how Jewish veterans appropriated nationalist narratives of the “front experience” and asserted their status as Frontkämpfer in the early years of the Third Reich despite Nazi efforts to exclude them from the people’s community. Geheran argued that traditional German discourses that equated military wartime sacrifice with citizenship and national belonging persisted after 1933 and continually forced the Nazis to make compromises in their anti-Jewish campaign. Darren O’Byrne’s paper “Political Civil Servants and the German Administration under Nazism” explored the reasons why the German civil service willingly complied with the radical demands of the Nazi regime by looking at the personal biographies and professional experiences of some of the Third Reich’s top bureaucrats. By examining the role of the “new breed” of Nazi civil servant – those who were appointed solely because of their ties with the NSDAP – in more detail, O’Byrne demonstrated that the Gleichschaltung of the civil service was a two-way process that also resulted in the “bureaucratization” of Nazi administrative elites and, occasionally, in shifting patterns of loyalty towards the NSDAP.

The second panel examined the process of denazification. Mikkel Dack’s paper “Retreating into Trauma: The Fragebogen, Denazification, and Victimhood in Occupied Germany” examined the denazification questionnaire that was distributed by the four Allied military governments to nearly twenty million Germans after World War Two. Responding to the questionnaire, he argued, forced Germans to interpret, describe, and reinvent personal traumas of war and hardships of dictatorship. This process, Dack contended, created an environment in which recovery from trauma was exceedingly difficult because inventing and perpetuating a victim status could be used as a powerful currency for economic and social gain. Kerstin Hofmann’s paper “Erwin Schüle als Leiter der Ludwigsburger Zentralen Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen im Spannungsfeld zwischen Justiz, Politik und Gesellschaft” examined Erwin Schüle, the first director of the Ludwigsburg Office charged with prosecuting Nazi crimes, and his role in its investigations of Nazi crimes. She argued that the circumstances of his resignation due to his own Nazi past have to be understood in the context of the East-West conflict during the Cold War and the changing social and political climate of West Germany.

The third panel explored two different aspects of social research in postwar West Germany. Sonja Ostrow’s paper, “Measuring
Democracy: Public Opinion Research in Western Germany, 1945–55,” examined the goals and methods of public opinion polling in Germany after 1945. Ostrow argued that the work of the early practitioners of opinion research, including the U.S. occupation forces, the Allensbach and Emnid Institutes, and the reconstituted Frankfurt School, was guided by a utopian faith in the ability of empirical opinion research to spread democratic cultural and political practices but also by a fundamental distrust of their German research subjects. Lisa Renken’s paper “The ‘almighty achievement principle’: The critique of Leistung between 1965 and 1975” mapped the redefinition of concepts of Leistung and Leistungsgesellschaft by student protestors, activists, psychologists, pedagogical experts, and sociologists in the period from 1965 to 1975. Renken demonstrated that sociological research started questioning the empowering nature of Leistung already in the decade before the 1968 student protests, thus substantiating the idea of the “long sixties” as a period of change in West German society. She also argued that psychological appropriations of the concept of Leistung extended into mainstream debates and practice after 1968, forming part of the focus on a fragile, emotionalized self that defined the early 1970s.

The fourth panel was dedicated to the theme of exile and transnational networks. Scott Krause’s paper “Propagandists of Freedom: The Conversion of Exiled ‘Revolutionary Socialists’ into West Berlin Cold Warriors, 1933–1959” argued that West Berliners’ rapid acceptance of liberal democracy was not just a product of the Cold War but of a transatlantic network of returned Social Democrats and liberal American occupation officials, who shared Nazi-imposed exile in the past, determination against Communism in the present, and hopes for an electable Left in the future. To advance their agenda, they crafted the narrative of heroic West Berliners as an “outpost of freedom” in the Cold War. Maria Birger’s paper “West-Östliche Erfolgsgeschichten? Vernetzung und öffentliche Inszenierung von westlichen Journalisten, Intellektuellen, Politikern und sowjetischen Dissidenten (1960–1980)” examined the network that connected Soviet dissidents and Western journalists, intellectuals and politicians in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to showing how these transnational networks reflected the larger political and cultural context of the Cold War, Birger analyzed how the West German media reported on Soviet dissidents and the effects this reporting had on the careers of both journalists and dissidents.

The fifth panel was devoted to cultural history. Elsa Duval’s paper “Aachen Cathedral on the 1978 UNESCO World Heritage List: The
West German ‘Commitment to Europe’ examined how and why, in 1978, West Germany chose the Aachen Cathedral as the first site that it nominated for the UNESCO World Heritage List. Her analysis focused on how the actors used material culture and the distant past in an attempt to shape the international image of the Federal Republic, a European discourse of history, and the World Heritage List. Briana Smith’s paper “Creative Alternatives: Experimental Art Scenes and Cultural Politics in Berlin, 1971-1999” investigated the democratic turn in cultural politics across West Germany in the 1970s and the unique factors shaping the reforms in West Berlin. Smith identified how artists and art associations as well as the West Berlin Senate sought to incorporate visual art into everyday life and thus contributed to the island city’s expanding experimental art scene in the late 1970s.

The sixth panel addressed the history of education and child welfare. Hagen Stöckmann’s paper “‘Führerschaft’ als individuelle Haltung? Das nationalsozialistische System der Nachwuchsführerausbildung am Beispiel der NS-Ordensjunker” examined the 1930s as a transformative decade during which a new form of Haltungserziehung established itself, which saw the primary aim of education in the shaping of “character.” In his analysis of NS-Ordensburgen as educational institutions inspired by the idea of Haltungserziehung, Stöckmann argued that the lack of concrete practical guidance at these Ordensburgen and the resulting efforts of students to shape their own education might help to explain the motivation of Nazi perpetrators. Lauren Stokes’ paper, “‘Illiterate in Two Languages’: Child Welfare and Child Migration in 1980s West Germany,” showed that sociological research on the “second generation” of migrants that linked child welfare to a stable national identity was used by politicians in order to justify new restrictions on child migration. Her paper also suggested that in the arena of migration policy, “Westernization” and “Europeanization” often led to restriction, not liberalization.

The seventh panel examined aspects of the history of West Germany and West Berlin. Aline-Florence Manent’s paper “The Intellectual Origins of the ‘German Model’: Conceptions of Scales in the early Federal Republic of Germany” reconstructed the ways in which West German statesmen and public lawyers theorized the challenges of democratic reconstruction in early postwar Germany. These West German political actors, Manent argued, drew on nineteenth-century German political and legal theory in order to formulate a localist
conception of democratic governance and to ensure that the new German polity would preserve a “humane” scale, amenable to the development of civic republicanism. Stefanie Eisenhut’s paper “Amerikaner in West-Berlin: Die Geschichte einer ‘imagined community’” analyzed the development of a German-American “imagined community” in West Berlin and the different narratives to which it gave rise. Although narratives of Berlin as an “island in a red sea,” the “picture-window of the West,” the “thorn in the side of communism” or the “outpost of freedom” may smack of pathos and propaganda today, Eisenhut argued, they played an important role in endowing postwar West Berlin with an identity that anchored the city in a transatlantic community connecting it closely to the United States.

The eighth and final panel explored the relationship between private and public life in postwar West and East Germany. Jane Freeland’s paper “Domestic Violence in a Divided Berlin, 1969-1990” studied attempts to forge a more active citizenry in both East and West by examining how people like friends, neighbors and relatives were brought in to help address domestic violence in East and West Berlin. Although engaging others in intervention helped to raise awareness of violence in the family, Freeland argued, it also served to further privatize domestic violence because community action was used as a substitute for a more thorough reckoning of systemic and structural gender inequality. Ines Langelüddeke’s paper “Schweigen, Scham und Traditionen: Der Adelsfriedhof in den Erzählungen der zurückgekehrten Adelsfamilie und der Dorfbewohner nach 1989/90” presented a case study of the Adelsfriedhof (aristocratic cemetery) of the Eastern German town of Siebeneichen. After German unification, Langelüddeke argued, the cemetery functioned as a space that created distance between the inhabitants of the village and the aristocratic families that were returning to the village from West Germany. Whereas the village inhabitants focused on the cemetery’s fate during the GDR era, which could give rise to feelings of shame or fear as well as strategic silences, the aristocratic families regarded the cemetery as a place of tradition that created connections to earlier generations and to the manorial life before 1945.

Reflecting on the seminar’s topics and themes in the final discussion, participants noted that cultural history and intellectual history had been quite prominent, while social and economic history were comparatively neglected. Liz Harvey and Jonathan Wiesen observed that, instead of “looking for old Nazis” in postwar Germany, most postwar
papers did an excellent job of approaching the process by which postwar Germans adapted to democracy with great nuance: paying attention to the available options of self-fashioning and remaining open to the possibility that some Germans may, if only gradually, have become genuinely converted to democracy. Donna Harsch and Paul Nolte applauded the participants for having presented papers that were balanced and judicious. At the same time, Harsch urged the doctoral students to think a bit more about the role of structure and interests, and Nolte noted that he would have wished for more “edginess” and encouraged the authors to engage larger interpretative debates and concepts. In a similar vein, Michael Wildt gave some excellent advice with regard to the publication of the dissertations presented at the seminar. Given the flood of publications, he advised, every author needs to keep in mind the question “Warum soll das jemand lesen?” Every book needs to provide a compelling answer to that question right at the outset and at the beginning of every chapter. Given the impressive quality of the papers presented, the mentors and organizers of the seminar are confident that the dissertation writers will turn their projects into books that will indeed draw their readers in.

Richard F. Wetzell (GHI)