2015 ARCHIVAL SUMMER SEMINAR IN GERMANY


The Archival Summer Seminar in Germany 2015 began with an insult. “Dieser Dreckshammel von Regulat [this jerk of a teacher],” a representative of the German military government wrote in 1945, referring to a county teacher who had passed on confidential information about denazification measures in Landau to his Naziklüngel, his National Socialist clique. This line exemplifies the charm and the considerable challenge many American Ph.D. students experience when they begin to do research in German history. Terms like Dreckshammel, Regulat, and Naziklüngel are contemporary idioms that we do not easily find in dictionaries. In the primary sources, furthermore, such colloquial terms are often only handwritten in German script, the typography that remained in use in Germany officially until 1942, but unofficially for much longer, as all those who went to school in the late 1930s wrote with it until they died.

For more than twenty years, the GHI’s Archival Summer Seminar in Germany has aimed at familiarizing North American Ph.D. students with the intricacies of archival practices crucial to the study of German history. To this end, the program brings ten ABD PhD
candidates to Germany for two weeks each year. In the first week of the program participants attend a German paleography class taught by Walther Rummel, the head of the Landesarchiv Rheinland Pfalz in Speyer. This class is followed by one week of visiting archives on the federal, county, and non-government level. Admission to the program requires a good dissertation project, excellent knowledge of the German language, and the ambition to learn not only a foreign, but a historical language. This year’s application procedure began in January 2015, with the submission of proposals, ABD transcripts, and cover letters, followed by phone interviews with selected participants to examine their listening comprehension and speaking skills in German. In February, ten successful applicants were notified. They came from all across North America — from the West Coast (San Diego), South (Atlanta, Tallahassee, and St. Louis), and Northeast (Boston, Binghamton, and Chicago), as well as from Canada (Montreal and Toronto). Though these students’ projects covered a vast period of German history ranging from 1776 to 2014, they shared a conspicuous commonality: all of them were interested in methods of writing “history from below.” Rather than focusing on the nation-state, the ambition of these students was to trace German history from the margins, that is, from the perspectives of people who were excluded, criminalized, prosecuted, or who inhabited transnational spaces. It was this common motivation that brought them to Germany for this seminar.

Rummel began the paleography class in Speyer by presenting the primary source mentioned above. This choice has a long tradition. The note on the “Dreckshammel” is scribbled on the bottom of a printed government circular that otherwise would reveal nothing but inconspicuous formalities. Rummel explained that he likes to present this document to students because it nicely demonstrates that it is often what is most difficult to read — the fleetingly and informally added remarks rather than the printed text — that tells us the most interesting stories. Such notes speak of what contemporaries really thought, what their daily concerns were, and how they interacted with the state as individuals. Based on this line of reasoning, Rummel took this year’s participants through a sample of manuscripts ranging from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. These pieces, in turn, ranged from being written in Kurrentschrift, or Alte Deutsche Schrift, to Sütterlin, the last iteration of old German handwriting. The students, who had studied these German scripts ahead of time in preparation for the class, spent the mornings deciphering
Rummel’s assignments in small groups. Afterwards, they presented their transcripts to Rummel and discussed intriguing findings, common problems, and typical errors made. Most of the documents examined were correspondences between officials and common people, but they dealt with a wide range of issues. Examples include allegations of witchcraft, requests for emigration to the United States, complaints about unjustified incarceration, and, as seen above, attempts to remove national-socialist teachers. Reading these letters gradually helped the students develop a picture of German peoples’ everyday concerns, or Alltagsgeschichte, across centuries. In the end, some particularly well-versed students even found an error in Rummel’s own master transcript. Rummel saw this as the most valuable teaching moment of the course, exemplifying that nobody is immune to misreading.

Now equipped with good skills in paleography, the group moved on to Berlin on Friday afternoon. After enjoying a free weekend in the German capital, the students went on a series of visits to different archives. The first, and probably the most popular destination for North American researchers, was the Bundesarchiv Lichterfelde, which is part of the German National Archives. Students were introduced both to its holdings (mainly federal government records) and its terms of usage, including online search aids and ongoing digitization projects. The following days were spent in archives that matched the Bundesarchiv’s holdings in significance: the Behörde für Stasi-Unterlagen, which was declassified only recently, and which specializes in the records of the state security service of the German Democratic Republic (DDR); and the Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (Department of Foreign Affairs), which was recently in the news for hiring a commission of historians to research and account for its National Socialist past. To move beyond the national level, students were also introduced to the Landesarchiv Berlin, a state archive. The archival tour ended with visits to the Deutsche Kinemathek, a major non-government repository on film and photography, and to the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin’s major research library and Germany’s major site for manuscript collections that date back to the middle ages.

This core program was complemented by several afternoon workshops that gave students an opportunity to reflect on their own projects and the source types and research methods they involved. In Speyer, participants introduced their research to one another in
two afternoon sessions with brief presentations followed by group
discussions. In Berlin, Jens Gründler (Institut für Geschichte der
Medizin der Robert Bosch Stiftung), a post-doc who focuses on health
discourses in letters of German emigrants to the United States, and
Carolyn Taratko (Vanderbilt University), an Archival Summer Seminar
alumna who currently researches in Berlin, were invited to meet the
group. In their talks, they drew attention to the challenges not only of
reading German handwritten sources, but also of understanding the
scope of these documents’ explanatory power as “ego-documents”;
in addition, both scholars offered practical tips on how to locate such
primary sources in archives across Germany, and on how to approach
German archivists, who have a reputation for being grumpy.

While the results of this year’s seminar will not fully materialize until
the participants publish their dissertations, it is easy to vouch for
how effectively it sparked their research ambitions. Many students
browsed archives that were part of the program for their own research
purposes, and some even ended up visiting additional archives on
their own. Over the course of the archival tours, the participants asked
the archivists research-related questions with increasing proficiency
and precision, and some even got the archivists to help them locate
new materials. Researching in a foreign language and in a foreign
country is extremely challenging. While the growing self-confidence
and determination of these students to become experts of German
history is not a guarantee of their success, these two weeks were a
great start. Having experienced German research environments and
having connected with a group of their North American peers in the
process, these junior scholars of history have taken two valuable
steps that will open new paths in their future careers, just as seminar
participants in decades before them have done.

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