22ND TRANSATLANTIC DOCTORAL SEMINAR:
NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY
GERMAN HISTORY

Seminar at the German Historical Institute Washington, May 25-28, 2016. Co-organized by the German Historical Institute Washington and the BMW Center for German and European Studies at Georgetown University. Conveners: Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown University) and Richard F. Wetzell (GHI) Faculty mentors: David Blackbourn (Vanderbilt University), Neil Gregor (University of Southampton), Dagmar Herzog (City University of New York, Graduate Center), Ulrike Weckel (University of Giessen). Participants: Ian Beacock (Stanford University), Nils Bennemann (University of Duisburg-Essen), Patrick Gilner (Indiana University), Timon de Groot (Max Planck Research School for Moral Economies of Modern Societies, Berlin), David Harrisville (University of Wisconsin, Madison), Jean-Michel Johnston (University of Oxford), Lukas Keller (Free University of Berlin), Andrew Kloiber (McMaster University), Mary-Ann Middelkoop (University of Cambridge), Cassandra Painter (Vanderbilt University), Alexandria Ruble (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Konrad Sziedat (University of Munich), Robert Terrell (University of California, San Diego), Marcel Thomas (University of Bristol), Gavin Wiens (University of Toronto). Kathleen Rahn (University of Leipzig) could not attend; her paper and comment were read.

The twenty-second Transatlantic Doctoral Seminar in German History was dedicated to nineteenth- and twentieth-century German history. The seminar brought together eight doctoral students from North America and eight from Europe, all of whom are working on dissertations in German history. The meeting was organized in eight panels, which opened with two comments by fellow students, followed by discussion of the precirculated papers.

The seminar’s first panel commenced with comments by Mary-Ann Middelkoop and Ian Beacock, which situated the first two papers in the broader historiography of technological change and scientific progress in nineteenth-century Germany and beyond. Nils Bennemann’s paper on maps of Germany’s largest river created by the Central Commission for Rhine Navigation interpreted the Commission as part of a “knowledge regime.” Technical concerns, he argued, were less important in shaping knowledge about the river than the inner workings of the Commission, the first international organization in
modern Europe. Jean-Michel Johnston’s paper examined the impact of telegraphy on the “social mood” in the German-speaking lands in the 1850s. Rather than presenting a story of unfettered optimism, he highlighted that high-speed communication often had an ambiguous impact on local communities. Spiraling demand for the service and uneven access created new time-based social hierarchies and led to widespread feelings of anxiety, Johnston suggested. The discussion focused on the specific place of German history in transnational histories of nineteenth-century Europe. Several comments also underscored that broad analytical categories, such as “knowledge regime” and “social moods,” needed unpacking.

The second panel, whose papers were introduced by David Harrisville and Alexandria Ruble, dealt with the tensions between the local and the national and between belonging and exclusion in Imperial Germany. Gavin Wiens’ paper looked at Prussian and non-Prussian perceptions of the Imperial German Army — an entity that remained a collection of regionally-based contingents until 1918. He argued that this structure was perceived as necessary and problematic at the same time. Although it did not undermine German fighting strength in the First World War, it produced considerable anxiety in the preceding years. Lukas Keller’s dissertation project honed in on the wartime years by looking at official discourses about “domestic enemies” and internal security in Germany between 1914 and 1918. “Spymania” after the declaration of the state of siege sparked a moral panic about foreigners living in Germany. Keller’s paper made considerable use of sources “from below” to chart how ordinary Germans responded to — and often stoked — the public hysteria about this alleged internal threat. The discussion touched on a number of themes, particularly the relationship between the Imperial Army and feelings of national belonging as well as the peculiarity — or lack thereof — of Germany’s national security discourse in the late Kaiserreich.

The papers of the third panel, introduced by Robert Terrell and Andrew Kloiber, dealt with prison experiences and their afterlives in Imperial Germany. Kathleen Rahn’s paper examined how much agency white and African inmates as well as prison guards had in prisons in German South-West Africa. Timon de Groot focused on the lives of ex-convicts and their attempts to get officially rehabilitated as German citizens. Making extensive use of ex-convicts’ petitions, de Groot argued that the reinstatement of citizens’ rights (including the right to vote, wear a uniform, and join the military) was often
less important to petitioners than the regaining of social honor. The in-depth discussion focused on methodological issues, including the utilization of postcolonial theory and the absence of African primary sources in Rahn’s paper and the value and potential pitfalls of petitions as primary sources in de Groot’s work.

The fourth panel, introduced by Marcel Thomas and Lukas Keller, left the Imperial period behind and turned the seminar’s attention to the aftermath of the First World War and the first years of Weimar. Both papers emphasized international perspectives on this period of transition. Mary-Ann Middelkoop took a close look at the young republic’s emerging foreign cultural policy, with a particular focus on the role that a select group of artists, diplomats, and gallery owners played in shaping the way in which Germany’s first democracy sought to portray itself abroad. Patrick Gilner’s paper, which is part of a dissertation on the Leipzig War Crimes Trials, analyzed Allied discussions about the attempt to extradite and try Kaiser Wilhelm II in late 1918. Gilner demonstrated that the Allies sought to use an ad hoc trial of the Kaiser to create a new international juridical system for punishing war crimes and wars of aggression. Much of the discussion revolved around different definitions of German culture — who defined which art was archetypically German? How monolithic was German culture and did it cross borders intact? Several participants also wanted to know how both papers related to the recent historiographical emphasis on the contingency and openness of the Weimar Republic’s future.

Much like the preceding discussion, the fifth panel, introduced and contextualized by Gavin Wiens and Konrad Sziedat, highlighted the vitality of new scholarship on the Weimar Republic. Cassandra Painter’s paper on the interwar cult surrounding Anna Katharina Emmerick, which is part of a larger project on the cult of this stigmatic visionary in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany, showed how Germans reimagined the rural setting of Emmerick’s life through the anxieties and longings of their own turbulent time. The Weimar years also saw efforts to organize and professionalize her acolytes; a veritable “Emmerick Movement” emerged. Ian Beacock presented a paper that forms part of a larger work on political emotions in the Weimar Republic. Based on two case studies, the 1922 murder of Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau and a speech that novelist Thomas Mann gave in its aftermath, Beacock analyzed republican debates about the relationship between passion and democracy.
Defenders of the republic debated intensely whether democratic politics should be the province of considered rational judgment or whether a more passionate republicanism was in order. The lively debate honed in on the contribution of the history of emotions to scholarship on Weimar. Was Beacock’s work primarily concerned with key intellectuals and the ways in which they used emotion in their rhetorical strategies? Could the history of emotions help in analyzing the fervor of Emmerick’s followers? Were emotions key to understanding Weimar’s demise? Several commentators also suggested drawing inspiration from recent scholarship on religion and emotion in the postwar period.

The sixth panel, on which Cassandra Painter and Patrick Gilner served as commentators, examined two popular libations — beer and coffee — and their role as commodities through which meanings were conveyed and new meanings created in postwar Germany. Robert Terrell’s paper analyzed the politics of food and beer in postwar Bavaria. He argued that beer was deeply interwoven with the broader agricultural policy of Bavaria and thus led to tensions with the American occupiers, who, at a time of extreme caloric scarcity, considered beer a luxury rather than a staple food item. His larger project aims to unpack the commodification of “Bavarianness” in postwar Germany. Andrew Kloiber’s study, by contrast, looks at the history of coffee in the German Democratic Republic and suggests that the Socialist regime’s need to supply coffee challenged its claims to legitimacy. The paper he presented looked at trade agreements the GDR concluded with a number of states in the developing world. In spite of the regime’s rhetoric of internationalist socialist solidarity, Kloiber contended, these agreements reproduced a racial understanding of the division between East Germany and its coffee partners, such as Laos and Vietnam. The discussion teased out how to situate this study among other recent works that have used global history approaches to the study of state socialist regimes. Commentators also questioned the somewhat fixed understanding of “identity” at the heart of Terrell’s paper and emphasized a number of continuities between the Nazi era and the postwar period.

The seminar’s penultimate panel, introduced by Timon de Groot and Nils Bennemann, included two rather different papers. David Harrisville focused on the emergence of the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht,” a myth that already took shape during the war. Based on a close reading of a sample of German soldiers’ letters to the home
front, his paper examined how soldiers on the eastern front attempted
to portray themselves as a liberating force during the invasion of
the Soviet Union — and thus reframed a war of extermination as a
moral endeavor. Alexandria Ruble’s paper, which is part of a larger
project on family law reforms in both German states, explored the
SED’s new socialist family code of 1954. Protests by Christians, she
argued, had a profound effect and prevented the East German gov-
ernment from approving the Code. The discussion brought to the
fore methodological and historiographical questions. Participants
urged Harrisville to problematize the small size of his sample more
fully and to refrain from presenting his work as the first to tackle
big themes, such as Nazi morality. The group also wanted to know
more about how Ruble’s work would help historians to grapple with
the “asymmetrical entanglement” (Klessmann) of the two German
states post-1945.

The papers of the seminar’s final panel, with comments by Jean-
Michel Johnston and Kathleen Rahn, both explored the relationship
between politics and ideology on the one hand and individual politi-
cal beliefs and practices of activism on the other. Marcel Thomas’
spatial history of postwar Germany considered how an East and a
West German village were transformed in the decades after 1945.
His sample chapter concentrated on two instances of local activism
to shed light on the renegotiation of the citizen-state relationship in
East and West Germany. The terms “expectation” and “disappoint-
ment” were key to Konrad Sziedat’s investigation of how left-wing
West German activists dealt with the collapse of state socialism after
1989. Taking the campaign for “Solidarity with Solidarnosc” as his
case study, Sziedat showed that prior to — and indeed after — 1989
many on the left had hoped that, with the help of activists in Poland
and elsewhere in the Eastern bloc, Western liberal democracies
would be transformed alongside state socialist regimes. Such hopes
for a “Third Way” between socialism and liberal democracy initially
survived the big turning point of 1989 and only disappeared more
slowly in the 1990s. During the discussion, participants pondered the
relationship between the state and individual beliefs and practices,
the use of autobiography and oral history in contemporary history
writing, and the efficacy of contemporary terms and concepts for
historical analyses.

During the final discussion, participants reflected on what their topics
and approaches said about the state of research on German history
more generally. Emotions featured very prominently in many of this year’s papers, while none of the papers dealt with environmental history, the history of the body, or labor history, for instance. The mentors urged the graduate students not to become intellectual slaves to certain scholarly trends. For one, not every German history study had to be transnational; it was still legitimate to anchor one’s work very firmly in a particular region. Similarly, dissertations should not be too closely tied to conceptual frameworks whose utility was limited. This year marked the first time that the Transatlantic Doctoral Seminar included papers on both nineteenth- and twentieth-century German history. Participants overwhelmingly welcomed this merged format, because it forced them to read and think beyond their immediate areas of expertise. Given that senior scholars have often voiced concerns regarding the future of nineteenth-century German history, the fact that six of the sixteen papers dealt with this century was seen as a good sign.

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